

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Catechesis:

Returning to a Deeper Teaching that Produces Transformed Disciples for Christ

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

Catechesis: Returning to a Deeper Teaching that Produces Transformed Disciples for Christ
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This Thesis Project addresses the lack of commitment found in many new and young believers today by providing a catechesis that engages individuals emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and experientially. After a thorough review of many biblical, historical and contemporary approaches to religious teaching, this study developed an intervention plan that merged five essential elements: (1) A culture that emphasizes the importance of baptism; (2) Adequate time to instill spiritual habits; (3) The utilization of multiple volunteers; (4) The incorporation of experiential learning; and (5) Content that encompasses both theology and discipleship. Qualitative research was conducted through the interviews of fourteen participants in the intervention plan who evaluated whether this longer, deeper, and more experiential catechesis led to a more committed walk with Christ. This data was compared to the interviews of ten seasoned pastors who helped identify a variety of essential elements and effective tools utilized within Mennonite catechisms. When analyzing the data, the research showed that when church leaders utilize the giftings of multiple volunteers to supplement the essential catechetical elements with experiential learning over the course of several months, it can lead to a deeply committed faith. This project provides insight into a catechesis that not only transforms lives but potentially will help shape the way discipleship and spiritual formation is conducted in the future at Martins Creek and beyond.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Ministry Context	2
Problem Presented	8
Purpose Statement	11
Basic Assumptions	13
Definitions	14
Limitations.....	16
Delimitations.....	17
Thesis Statement	18
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework	22
Literature Review	22
<i>The Derivation of the Problem</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>A Historical Account of Catechesis</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Approaches.....</i>	<i>34</i>
Theological Foundations	41
<i>An Old Testament Foundation of Teaching</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>A New Testament Foundation of Teaching</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>The Correlation Between Biblical Teaching and Catechesis</i>	<i>51</i>
Theoretical Foundations.....	55
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	63
Models of Catechesis in the Broader Church.....	63

<i>Pastor A</i>	65
<i>Pastor B</i>	67
<i>Pastor C</i>	68
<i>Pastor D</i>	70
<i>Pastor E</i>	71
<i>Pastor F</i>	72
<i>Pastor G</i>	73
<i>Pastor H</i>	74
<i>Pastor I</i>	76
<i>Pastor J</i>	77
Intervention Plan of the Local Church	79
<i>A Description of the Church's Original Baptismal Class</i>	79
<i>A Description of the New Discipleship Program</i>	80
<i>Encounter Interviews</i>	85
<i>Participant 1</i>	86
<i>Participant 2</i>	86
<i>Participant 3</i>	87
<i>Participant 4</i>	88
<i>Participant 5</i>	88
<i>Participant 6</i>	89
<i>Participant 7</i>	90
<i>Participant 8</i>	90
<i>Participant 9</i>	91

<i>Participant 10</i>	92
<i>Participant 11</i>	93
<i>Participant 12</i>	93
<i>Participant 13</i>	94
<i>Participant 14</i>	95
<i>General Observations by the Researcher</i>	96
Chapter 4: Results	99
The Solicitation of Candidates	100
The Ideal Length	102
Volunteerism	107
Experiential Learning	109
Essential Content	114
Synthesizing the Data	117
Chapter 5: Conclusion	121
How Does this Research Correlate with the Literature Reviewed?	123
What Research Still Needs to Be Done?	128
How Might This Research Affect the Broader Church?	130
What Can Be Gleaned from the Research Moving Forward?	132
Bibliography	136
APPENDIX A	143
APPENDIX B	146
APPENDIX C	149
APPENDIX D	151

Chapter 1: Introduction

An alarming exodus by young adults from the church cries out for action and should prompt church leaders to reformulate how they disciple new believers.¹ Transforming how the church teaches these adolescents can engender a revival in the church. When considering the plethora of factors that may contribute to this declining trend, it can be overwhelming to know where to begin.² If the local church is willing to take small manageable steps, beginning with an honest evaluation of where it falls short and what can be changed, these steps can grow into mass renewal. The key to renewal, however, is that these changes must be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The genesis of this thesis project derives from this very hope, recognizing that more can be done to nurture the delicate fabric that makes up the tapestry of young and new believers at Martins Creek, the rural Mennonite congregation this writer is blessed to pastor. One practical place to begin is the systematic methodology attached to a church's religious teaching, specifically the catechetical process, when a person is disciplined in preparation for baptism.

Countless adolescents enter into adulthood with a faith that is fragile and unstable, primarily because the church has failed to provide adequate teaching that creates a solid foundation that can be built upon.³ The pinnacle of a person's decision to commit the rest of his

¹ Barna Group reports that over two-thirds of young adults with a Christian background have dropped out of church involvement for an extended period or for good. David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 15.

² Christianity Today says the leading factors include: (1) Moving away to college; (2) Church members seem judgmental or hypocritical; (3) Didn't feel connected to people in church; (4) Disagreed with the church's stance on political/social issues; and (5) Work prevents me from attending. Griffin Paul Jackson, "The Top Reasons Young People Drop Out of Church," *Christianity Today* 63, no. 1 (January 2019), accessed February 27, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/church-drop-out-college-young-adults-hiatus-lifeway-survey.html>.

³ This will be further explored in the Review of Literature. This is the primary argument in a study done by Andrew Zirschky, "Practical Theology as the Foundation of Youth Ministry," Center for Youth Ministry Training, accessed January 29, 2020, <https://www.cymt.org/practical-theology-as-the-foundation-of-youth-ministry/>.

or her life to Jesus is the most opportune time to build this foundation. Yet too many churches do not take full advantage of this impressionable age and fill their youth programs and baptismal classes with shallow and superficial teaching. This study attempts to better understand the most effective elements of catechesis, knowing this platform of religious teaching is positioned to elevate the budding faith of new and young believers into a more committed and sustainable faith. Though the catechetical process alone is not the sole answer to the declining trend of young adults leaving the church, this study shows that it is one of the most significant and pragmatic places to start.

This is not the first era that the church has faced challenging circumstances that have taken their toll on the steadfast faithfulness of its believers. Though these may be unique times, there is still a great deal that can be gleaned from the multitude of tumultuous times the church has faced historically. History has shown that a revival in how the church teaches and prepares its new and young believers for baptism has equipped the church to endure some of the harshest societal and cultural pressures, including persecution and martyrdom.⁴ It is the belief of this writer that a change in catechesis at Martins Creek is one simple step that could have rippling and lasting effects on the church moving forward. This project will show that if Martins Creek couples an extensive and deep catechesis with transformative experiences, it will better prepare its new and young believers for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ.

Ministry Context

Martins Creek is a rural, Mennonite congregation of over 300 members who trace their denominational roots back to the Anabaptist movement of the Reformation. In the early part of the sixteenth century, Anabaptists distinguished themselves from other reformers by placing a

⁴ Allen Kreider, "Baptism, catechism, and the eclipse of Jesus' teaching in early Christianity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no. 1 (January 1998): 7.

strong emphasis on believer's baptism. This doctrinal stance resulted in mass persecution and martyrdom by both Roman Catholics and Magisterial Protestants. Anabaptism rooted itself in a belief that baptism should be reserved only for those who have consciously repented, changed their lives, placed their faith in Christ, and personally requested baptism.⁵ Historically, this has always been a core value of Anabaptism, which has been embraced and passed down to its denominational offshoots, including Amish and Mennonites.

In 1865, Martins Creek separated from the Amish Church, who did not believe members should congregate in church buildings, use musical instruments, take photographs, use lightning rods, or have insurance. Those members who split from the Amish Church believed discipleship was not a matter of avoiding these 'worldly' crutches, but instead it was a matter of living out Christ's teachings in a Christ-like manner. Martins Creek joined what became known as the "Amish Mennonite Church," which eventually took on the denominational name "Mennonite Church."⁶

In 2002, the two Anabaptist denominations known as Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church merged to form Mennonite Church USA. Though there were some major theological differences that preexisted before the merger, these distinctives became amplified after they consolidated. These variances inevitably caused a rift in the newly formed denomination that led to many churches choosing to leave.

In 2015, Martins Creek left Mennonite Church USA because the church believed the denomination was straying from its traditional and more conservative doctrines of belief. In

⁵ John A. Wagner, ed., *Voices of the Reformation: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life* (Denver, CO: Greenwood, 2015), 110.

⁶ Warren Miller, *Martins Creek Mennonite Church: Centennial Book* (Millersburg, OH: Martins Creek Mennonite Church, 1965), 5.

2017, Martins Creek joined Lancaster Mennonite Conference⁷ and networked with fellow evangelical Anabaptist churches through the Evana Network⁸. Through these tumultuous times, Martins Creek has managed to hold true to traditional Anabaptist doctrines while not conforming to the legalism that preoccupies some of the more conservative Anabaptist groups. At the forefront of these doctrinal beliefs is believer's baptism, a practice cherished and revered still to this day at Martins Creek.

Even though the preparations and teachings leading up to baptism were systematically and uniformly established during the Reformation, the catechetical process has diversified across the various offshoots of Anabaptism over the last several centuries. With each church and denominational split came differing opinions on how to prepare an individual for baptism and what post-baptismal practices should be observed. In Martins Creek's 155 years of existence, it too has evolved in how it prepares its new and young believers for baptism. In the first part of the twentieth century, Mennonite theologians like John C. Wenger, Harold S. Bender, John L. Horst, John L. Stauffer, C. Henry Smith, and G. F. Hershberger produced a multitude of booklets, pamphlets, and tools used by many Mennonite churches in preparing its baptismal candidates. The theological material was thick, the memorization was abundant, and the level of conformity attached to lifestyle discipleship was high. These heightened expectations ascribed to baptism were clearly laid out and publicly embraced by young and new believers as a confession of faith. With these steps of faith came deep roots that for generations strengthened the church and caused it to be resilient and steadfast.

⁷ Lancaster Mennonite Conference has been in existence since 1719. They joined Mennonite Church USA in 2001 and left Mennonite Church USA in 2017, the same year Martins Creek became members of LMC.

⁸ Evana Network was formed in 2015 as a network of evangelical Anabaptist churches who wished to preserve and adhere to a document published by the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1995). This document was no longer being upheld by many churches in Mennonite Church USA.

In the 1970s, Martins Creek began to loosen up its attachments to baptism and discipleship. The church no longer expected women to wear head coverings after they were baptized and the steps leading up to baptism were simplified. With each decade came an inauguration of parents who had fewer religious expectations placed upon their children. Also, with each decade came a theological chasm that solidified the vast differences between the various Mennonite congregations and denominations. By the time these diverging Mennonite churches entered the twenty-first century, this chasm was miles apart. There were no longer trusted theologians within the broader church that each congregation could lean on to provide a unified source for baptismal instruction.

For much of the twentieth century, baptismal classes were a rite of passage for youth in the Mennonite Church. These classes were often taught to the entire youth group in a classroom format, giving the students the choice to be baptized at the end of the class. In the past twenty years the church has strayed from this practice due to many members confessing later that they only chose to be baptized out of peer pressure instead of a true confession of faith.

As a result, the pendulum has swung the complete opposite direction, where young and new believers are expected to come forward on their own accord, with very little pastoral or group influence. With no denominational curriculum in place and no systematic methodology attached to the catechetical process, it is up to each pastor to determine how to introduce baptism to individuals, what should be taught or emphasized, and how long the catechetical process should take before a person is baptized. At Martins Creek, individuals initiate the conversation, requesting to be baptized, and meet with the pastor up to six times. The baptismal class uses the

book *God's Story, Our Story*⁹ as a literary source for exploring a biblical survey, followed by a review of core doctrinal beliefs held by Mennonites.

Over the past ten years, the number of individuals expressing a desire to be baptized at Martins Creek has dwindled dramatically. Similarly, the number of baptized members who have remained committed in their faith has also diminished.¹⁰ Even though believer's baptism remains a central core value of Martins Creek, it is evident that the expectations of discipleship attached to the catechetical process has become marginalized. As a result, the covenantal commitment attached to baptism and the ritual of baptism itself has also become marginalized by many young and new believers. This seems to be a shared sentiment among many pastors of congregations in Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network.

Lancaster Mennonite Conference is made up of 230 congregations and Evana is comprised of forty-four congregations. Most of these congregations are located in rural settings, primarily in North and Central America. Martins Creek is located in Holmes County, Ohio, where over half of the population identifies as either Amish or Mennonite, creating a culture immersed in Anabaptism. This creates a dilemma of ethnic assimilation that uniquely focuses on the cultural aspects of Anabaptism instead of the various virtues related to Christian discipleship. Phrases like "being Amish" or "being Mennonite" seem to lead either to legalism or traditionalism, where the focus is more on outward displays of religion rather than an inward transformation that leads to a commitment to Christ and his teachings.

⁹ Michelle Hershberger, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2003).

¹⁰ In the past ten years, Martins Creek went from having ninety-four percent of their youth and young adults choose to be baptized to only thirty-six percent. Using the same demographics, only half of those who have graduated regularly attend church now as adults.

Demographically, Martins Creek is homogeneous in its ethnicity, mirroring the predominantly Caucasian county it draws people from; but also reflecting the Swiss-German roots of Anabaptism that are a part of its history. The diversity of Martins Creek is found in its age demographics. Thirty-six percent of the congregation is sixty or older. Twenty-six percent is between the ages of forty and sixty. Twenty-four percent is under twenty. The smallest age demographic by far is represented by those between twenty and forty, making up only fourteen percent of the total congregation. This age bracket also represents the lowest in regular attendance.¹¹ Seventy-three percent of the entire congregation attends church regularly. Over eighty percent of the members forty and older attend frequently. However, less than sixty percent of those between the ages of twenty and forty attend church regularly. Martins Creek has seen a dramatic decline in Millennials and Generation Z who attend church faithfully. Many Millennials who grew up at Martins Creek are not attending church at all.¹²

Attending church is no longer a priority for half of the youth and young adults at Martins Creek. Out of the twenty-one high school students who claim Martins Creek as their home church, less than ten attend Sunday school faithfully. Whether this is due to the structure of religious teaching, the cultural influences of this generation, or the decomposing emphasis of church in the family systems, it is extremely clear that change must be imminent if the church wants to reverse the trend of religious apathy plaguing the youth and young adults today. A great place to start is the religious teaching of catechesis leading up to a person's decision to be baptized.

¹¹ Regular attendance is determined by members who attend the Sunday morning worship service over seventy-five percent of the time in a given year.

¹² There are differing opinions on the birth ranges of each generation. For the sake of clarity, this study has placed the birth range of Millennials between 1984 and 1998, and Generation Z between 1999 and 2015.

This writer is the lead pastor of Martins Creek and oversees the youth ministries, baptismal classes, and baptisms of all young and new believers. With these pastoral responsibilities come a sense of ownership regarding the spiritual welfare of these young people. Although family, peers, and other church leaders all bear part of this load, this writer is best positioned to create a change in the way Martins Creek disciplines its young and new believers. Any change must start with an honest evaluation of how baptismal classes are currently structured. This study is a Spirit-led effort to partner with the leadership teams of Martins Creek, Lancaster Mennonite Conference, and the Evana Network to vastly improve the catechetical process as a catalyst for a sustainable and in-depth form of discipleship.

Problem Presented

The problem this project aims to address is the lack of depth and transformability in the catechesis at Martins Creek Mennonite Church. At the heart of this problem is not pastoral laziness or apathy. It is not the cold disregard of discipleship. It is the result of fine-tuning a process that tries to balance a number of factors that have drastically influenced the philosophy of religious teaching. Though these factors may differ in other congregations, there are four contributing factors that have significantly influenced the religious teaching at Martins Creek: (1) A shift in teaching style found in today's culture; (2) The history surrounding the Mennonite church; (3) The church's philosophy of baptism; and (4) The fear of losing its young people.

The past three decades have brought a cultural shift in how schools teach students. With the rise of standardized testing, teachers are pressed to cover a wealth of information that best prepares the students for tests, foregoing various learning methods that focus more on shaping and nurturing the whole person. This has crept into the teaching culture of the church; whose religious teaching often focuses more on information transfer instead of transformative

discipleship. At Martins Creek, the baptismal classes typically include a survey of the Bible, a brief account of church history, and an overview of theological distinctives. Similar to the standardized learning objectives taught in the school system, these catechetical objectives are nothing more than head knowledge if they are never fully embraced. The process rarely provides opportunities for the objectives to impact the student in a way that leads to personal transformation.

The limited amount of denominational resources available to Mennonite churches have also crippled its religious teaching. As mentioned in the Ministry Context, the Mennonite Church has been plagued with multiple denominational splits throughout its history. The Mennonite churches that exist today are fragmented and quite diverse in their theological makeup, leaving them very congregational in their ecclesiology. This fragmentation, coupled with a disincentive view of higher theological education, has limited the amount of theological resources produced by Mennonites. What is available is often grossly dated, theologically controversial, or lacks depth and application. Therefore, catechisms offered in Mennonite congregations are often manufactured by the pastors. As a result, many Mennonite pastors struggle with and disagree about what should be covered and how long the process should take place. Though this may be freeing to some, it creates an inconsistency at Martins Creek that drastically affects the dynamics of each session and each group.

This is where the philosophy of baptism adds to the problem. Some pastors believe a person should be baptized immediately upon request and that discipleship should follow this public confession of faith. Others believe there should be an outward reflection of obedience that stems from extensive discipleship before one may be baptized. Many churches struggle to know theologically where they should fall within this wide spectrum of views. Where one falls will

ultimately dictate the content, length, and philosophy attached to the church's baptismal classes. Martins Creek has a high view of believer's baptism and agrees that discipleship should be a core value of the church but fails to know how these views and values coexist. As a result, the baptismal classes place little emphasis on discipleship, with the hope that the person will participate in the limited discipleship programs that are offered to the general population of the church later in life.

Finally, the fear of losing its young people places many congregations in a quandary, often resulting in structural changes to their youth or young adult programs, including their baptismal classes. Students today are overwhelmed with the amount of activities they are involved with and the expectations and weight often accompanying those activities. Church is no longer a priority for many families. It often is secondary to sports, academics, and recreation. If it is a priority, it can unfortunately add to the stress of balancing the overabundance of events that overextend young people today. Out of a fear of losing these young people to the abyss that often consumes their lives, churches often shy away from any heightened expectations coupled with youth programming, including the classes leading up to baptism. At Martins Creek, the structure, schedule, and expectations associated with the baptismal classes often are dictated by the busyness of those participating.

All these factors weigh on Martins Creek as it structures its baptismal classes. As a result, the catechetical process typically entails a moderately short series of classes, containing the bare minimum amount of information-based material assembled by the pastor, that will conveniently accommodate the schedules of those involved. This passive approach to catechesis leaves very little room for depth, growth, or transformation. As previously acknowledged, a person's faith does not hinge on the successfulness of the catechesis, but the catechism should at least be one of

many tools that can help develop and not hinder the discipleship process of these impressionable young people. It raises the question: Could the Mennonite church develop a catechesis that provides a better launching pad for discipleship that is deeper and transformative?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to analyze and synthesize a catechesis that will produce and equip a generation of committed and resilient disciples who will thrive during this time of religious decline. In the past ten years, Martins Creek went from having ninety-four percent of their youth and young adults choose to be baptized to only thirty-six percent. Using the same demographics, only half of those who have graduated from high school regularly attend church now as adults.

Mennonites are proud of their Anabaptist heritage, which highlights a movement that produced disciples willing to die for their doctrinal stance on believer's baptism. This resilient faith displayed by the sixteenth century Anabaptists, however, has withered in modern times. Now, not only is the church struggling to instill a strong desire to be baptized within its young believers, but it is also straining to produce, at the very least, a nominal level of commitment in many who grow up in the church.

As youth stand on the brink of maturity, it is essential that the church seize every opportunity to help shape and influence their faith before they are thrust into the world of adulthood where their fragile faith is often shattered. At Martins Creek, this warrants some significant changes. The church must place a strong emphasis on discipleship within the catechetical process to strengthen the fragile faith of young believers so the future of the church can flourish. The church has a choice. It can continue to sit back and wait for these young people to make a commitment to Jesus and hope that the current state encompassing its baptismal

classes will be suffice, or it can be proactive in discipling them into a commitment that can launch them into a more sustainable faith journey.

After evaluating the catechesis of Martins Creek, the church has made some necessary changes. Martins Creek has developed a discipleship program for its youth and young adults called Encounter 2020. This program is modeled after many mission-based discipleship training schools that combine ten essential elements of discipleship with transformative activities that will better equip a person to grow mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and experientially. This program takes four months and provides an avenue for individuals to make a formal commitment to Jesus through baptism. At its core, this is a discipleship process that also serves as a catechesis for those who wish, in the end, to be baptized. This program helps individuals solidify their commitment to Jesus, provides them with practical tools to grow in their faith, and uses experiential learning to set the stage for a lifelong journey of sustainable discipleship.

As it relates to this project, the Encounter 2020 program has led to an intervention plan that involves two steps. First, a sample group of baptized volunteers who have participated in the Encounter 2020 classes will help evaluate and analyze this new method of discipling as it compares to their original baptismal class. The information collected from this study will be placed alongside the qualitative research of various catechisms used across Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network. Both the Martins Creek feedback and conference data will help the leadership team of Martins Creek synthesize the most effective discipleship and catechesis capable of producing and equipping a generation of committed and resilient disciples who will thrive in their faith.

Basic Assumptions

During the first phase of the intervention plan, a group of young adults were interviewed, who had participated in the Encounter program. It is assumed that the relationship this writer has with these individuals did not taint their responses because it was made clear that their responses would be voluntary and not affect their relationship with the church or the researcher as their pastor. It is also assumed that their answers reflected their honest personal opinions without any influence from their peers, misunderstandings that were generated from the questions, or failure to remember any details surrounding the process accurately.

The second phase of the intervention plan involved researching other Mennonite congregations within Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network. This phase was used to develop a better understanding of which catechetical elements are most effective in helping a person become better prepared for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. In doing this, there is an assumption that the data generated from these other congregations will be applicable to Martins Creek. This assumption is based on the theological, ecclesiological, and cultural likeness between Martins Creek and many of these rural Mennonite congregations. Though there may be some variances, these differences are minimal and reflect the discrepancies Martins Creek may see within its own fluctuating makeup as various families come and go over time.

There are a variety of nuances associated with a person's faith that make it difficult to evaluate and measure the commitment level affiliated with these nuances. Simply because someone attends church regularly or volunteers frequently does not always reflect the depth of this person's faith. The genuineness of a person's faith can only be measured by God. In order to measure the commitment level of one's faith for this project, however, it is assumed that a

person's attendance, involvement, and outward displays of church life do indeed reflect the level of commitment affiliated with a person's faith.

Finally, it is possible that some pastors and church leaders may publicly inflate their church statistics to make themselves or their churches look better. This is a tendency of parishioners, as well, and the reason why some statistics referencing church attendance, for example, may be skewed. Perceptions on church attendance can often be higher than reality either because individuals legitimately think they attend church more often than they do or they simply do not want to admit they attend less frequently. With the emphasis of confidentiality pertaining to this study, hopefully eliminating the need for embellishment, it can be assumed that any data collected from pastors genuinely reflects the untainted reality of their congregations.

Definitions

The word "catechesis" is not often used within Mennonite circles, so it is important to first delineate what catechesis means along with the various other derivatives of this word. Jonathan D. Watson provides a historical synthesis of the term "catechesis," starting with its Greek origin, *katecheo*, which means "to teach or instruct." Watson notes that historically this word has been used to describe the religious teaching associated with the fundamental, doctrinal, and ethical content of the Christian faith in preparation for baptism.¹³ For the purpose of this thesis project, this will be the definition also used within this paper when referring to catechesis from this point forward.

The phrase "catechetical process" is used to describe the structural makeup of the various aspects and events involved in any procedures leading up to or affiliated with the act of baptism.

¹³Jonathan D. Watson, "The Relationship Between Baptism, Catechesis and Entrance to the Church: An Argument for a Theological Catalyst" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 5.

This may include the solicitation of candidates, the baptismal classes, any activities associated with these classes, and any preparatory activities affiliated with baptism. Words associated with catechesis include “catechumen,” which refers to the individual receiving instruction; “catechist,” which describes the person providing the instruction; “catechize,” which is the process of receiving catechesis; “catechism,” which describes the formal manual or instructional tool used for catechesis; and “catechetical,” which is the descriptive quality of catechesis.¹⁴

Anabaptism reflects the Christian movement that traces its origins to the Swiss and Dutch Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century. Though there are many Mennonite congregations and denominations that claim to be Anabaptists, this project will focus on the lineage of Martins Creek. In Holmes County, Ohio, there are dozens of Mennonite denominations including Amish Mennonite, Beachy Mennonite, Conservative Mennonite Conference, Mennonite Church USA, General Conference Mennonite, Evana Network and Lancaster Mennonite Conference, just to name a few. When making references to the word “Mennonite” within this paper, it will be referring to the Mennonite heritage Martins Creek affiliates with, which is either Lancaster Mennonite Conference or the Evana Network, unless otherwise noted. Lancaster Mennonite Conference and Evana do not represent a plain community and therefore the Mennonites referenced in this paper are not restricted by ordinances that require plain clothing or lifestyles that forbid the use of worldly luxuries like electricity or automobiles.

In association with the doctrinal views of Anabaptism, the phrase “believer’s baptism” will be defined as a belief that baptism is reserved only for those who have consciously repented, changed their lives, placed their faith in Christ and personally requested baptism. These are the views of believer’s baptism as found in the *Schleitheim Confession*, written by Michael Sattler in

¹⁴ Watson, “The Relationship Between Baptism, Catechesis and Entrance to the Church,” 5.

1527 and still observed today by Mennonites.¹⁵ Though this phrase is often used synonymously with “adult baptism,” it does not restrict baptism only to those who are adults. Believer’s baptism can be requested and administered to anyone old enough to consciously make this decision on their own accord. This includes children and youth who are old enough to understand their sinful nature and their need for forgiveness, and who have a yearning to repent and live the rest of their lives for Christ.

Limitations

The greatest limitation on this project is time. To truly evaluate how a catechesis will affect the new and young believers of Martins Creek, research should be conducted over the course of years using a control group at Martins Creek. For example, a group of youth could be given a more extensive catechism then monitored, interviewed, and evaluated five to ten years later to see if this had any effect on their faith. This is not possible, however, within the parameters of this study. Therefore, the research needed to be broadened to include other congregations within the Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network who have for years utilized more extensive catechisms than the catechisms used at Martins Creek.

Another limiting factor is finding a large enough sample of congregations within Lancaster Mennonite Conference and Evana that have effectively used a longer and more experiential catechesis. There are only 250 congregations between the two denominations. Not all of these congregations have records that can help in the research process; therefore the sampling was limited to an even smaller sampling group. In addition to this, the size of most congregations within the Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network is much smaller than Martins Creek. Thus, they may be limited in the number of young and new believers

¹⁵ Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1981), 167.

they have baptized recently, which ultimately has a ripple effect on the process related to their catechisms.

The research is limited to the information passed on from the various pastors interviewed. Due to the coronavirus pandemic it was not possible to observe some of the catechetical lessons and activities conducted by churches, so this study had to completely rely on the testimony of those leading or receiving the instruction. Verbal or written testimonials versus firsthand observation limits the breadth of insight gleaned from the various catechisms being offered in other churches. Finally, the research was limited in the number of Encounter 2020 participants who could be studied in phase one of the intervention plan. In order to properly evaluate the Encounter 2020 class compared to their previously attended baptismal class, the researcher could only interview those participating who were previously baptized.

Delimitations

This study has restricted its research to congregations within the Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network in order to maintain a sampling that is culturally and theologically similar to Martins Creek. Though the research could have focused on other denominations that have traditionally used more extensive catechisms, the differences in theology, church structure, and procedure may make the data more difficult to apply. Even other Anabaptist groups such as Amish or various conservative Mennonite denominations vary enough in their theology and ecclesiology that the data retrieved could be irrelevant. Even though it may be insightful to study the various catechisms used in the Mennonite church within the past five centuries, these historical catechisms may not work effectively within the cultural confines of this generation. Therefore, it is important to limit the study to only include a catechesis used by churches in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference or the Evana Network within the past ten years.

The geographic limitations this writer is imposing on this project narrows the research field to the Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network churches of North America. Although there may be a great deal to learn from some of the fastest growing, modern-day Anabaptist movements in places like Africa and Asia, the cultural and sociological differences between them and Martins Creek may be too great to think their process may transcend these variances. If, however, some aspects of these international models are being used effectively within North America, it may be beneficial to explore them abroad as well. The financial resources, however, limit the researcher from doing this.

Finally, this project will focus solely on the catechetical process as one process within a collection of tools used to disciple a believer over the course of time. Discipleship programs such as Sunday school, small groups, support groups, elementary programs, discipleship training schools, and Bible studies may all be effective tools in providing spiritual formation. Even though it might be interesting to discern what tools are most effective in discipleship, the research was limited to the catechetical process in order to make sure the study maintains relevancy to the current problem faced by Martins Creek. As stated earlier, the problem this project addresses is the lack of depth and transformability in the catechesis at Martins Creek Mennonite Church.

Thesis Statement

This project will show that if Martins Creek couples an extensive and deep catechesis with transformative experiences, then it will better prepare its new and young believers for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. Henry Cloud and John Townsend provide biblically based tools that can be used to equip people to experience spiritual growth. They contend that at the heart of this sanctifying experience is a spiritual formation that comes out of a collaborating

effort between the work of God and the work of those who wish to grow.¹⁶ Henry Blackaby believes this transformative experience starts with an understanding that God is always at work in the world. To experience God, one must be willing to enter into a personal relationship with God and join Him where He is at work. God reveals Himself, His purpose, and His way by the working of the Holy Spirit through Scripture, prayer, and life's experiences. When people choose to adjust their lives and position themselves to join God in what He is doing, it leads to obedience. In this obedience, people come to know God by experience.¹⁷

Blackaby is not suggesting that people can manufacture a transformative experience with God. He is arguing that if they position themselves where God is at work, their experiences with God will enable them to grow in their understanding of who He is and what His purpose and will is for their lives—ultimately leading to transformation. The transformative experiences this study will highlight include tools and activities that can lead to a more intimate relationship with Jesus; a deeper understanding of God's Word; a heightened desire to be obedient; a greater appreciation for the church; and a clearer sense of call and purpose as they focus on prayer and incorporate other spiritual disciplines into their lives.¹⁸

In the next chapter, this paper will show that the precedence of literature provides evidence that when the church was facing difficulty in maintaining committed disciples capable of overcoming the social and cultural pressures of their times, they turned to a more intense and transformative catechesis. Simply because something worked in the past does not mean that it

¹⁶ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals about Personal Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 335.

¹⁷ Henry Blackaby, Richard Blackaby, and Claude King, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 54.

¹⁸ These catechetical tools and transformative experiences will be further elaborated in Chapter Three.

will work today. Yet, there is a great deal to learn from those who successfully endured through some of the most tumultuous times of church history.

Alister McGrath argues that the past provides a skeletal foundation from which society can continue to critique and expand upon, and that it should never be tossed aside as irrelevant. The views of the past should be judged within the sociopolitical and cultural context in which they were written and critiqued against the backdrop of the ideological factors that shaped the theologians who penned them, but never discarded. McGrath concludes by saying, “we have been given responsibility for receiving, evaluating, and transmitting the Christologically concentrated heritage of the past to the future.”¹⁹ McGrath believes this theological gift is “handed over” and “handed down” to each generation, and they are obligated to wrestle with it within their own context, but they should never toss it out as something that is outdated and immaterial.²⁰

This project will attempt to utilize the extensive depth that was historically affiliated with catechisms in the early church as a skeletal foundation to critique and expand upon with methodology that is most effective today. There is a plethora of catechetical models being used by Mennonite congregations across Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network. Which models are effectively producing believers that will not waiver in their faith despite the social and cultural pressures of today? Though there is a great deal to learn from the literature reviewed for this project, there is a gap in the literature between the catechetical process implemented by Mennonite congregations and the impact it has on the commitment and

¹⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 200.

²⁰ Ibid.

sustainability level of its participants. This project fills that gap as it studies the most effective catechetical elements used in Mennonite churches today and highlights the enduring benefits they instill on the faith journey of developing Christians.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

Most churches instinctively want to solve contemporary issues plaguing society by implementing the newest and greatest fad.²¹ There is no question the Holy Spirit works in newly formed, innovative and modern ways. Nevertheless, any original, present-day trends should still be substantiated in biblical and historical truths. The framework upon which this project establishes its foundation is rooted theologically and theoretically in Scripture, and conceptually in the historical precedence of literature. Though each generation is uniquely formed by the time and culture they live in, there is still a great deal to glean from an astute understanding of God's Word and the synthetic historical development of Christian doctrine and practices. With an analytical study of this development, churches can continue to grow in how they can best carry out the doctrinal perspectives they hold dear. This chapter will provide a literary, theological and theoretical landscape of the biblical and historical practice of catechesis as a basis for this study and as a skeletal framework to evaluate and expand upon moving forward.

Literature Review

Though there is no shortage of literature focusing on Christian discipleship, the topic of catechesis is not as prevalent outside of historical or Catholic-based literature. The exceptional and concentrated sources that are available, however, provide a significant perspective that can impact and address the rooted issues behind the problem presented in this study. This review of precedent literature will highlight some of the key writings affiliated with the problem's origin alongside various writings about catechesis using the following themes: (1) The Derivation of the Problem; (2) A Historical Account of Catechesis; and (3) A Critical Analysis of

²¹ Todd Wilken, "The Fad-Driven Church," *Issues, Etc. Journal* 3, no. 3 (October 2014): 4-9.

Contemporary Approaches. These themes will guide the flow of this review and provide a solid foundation for this thesis project.

The Derivation of the Problem

Before considering the literary sources that focus on the biblical and historical development of catechesis, it is essential to establish a universal precedence regarding the problem Martins Creek is facing and how this problem relates to the exodus of young adults in churches. Though the specific problem this study addresses is the lack of depth and transformability in the catechetical process, it is evident in literature that the shallow approach to youth programming has had subsequent effects on the sustainability of faith in young believers. The decline of young people remaining connected to the church did not happen overnight. The warning signs have been there for decades. At the end of the twentieth century, author Mark Senter emphatically remonstrated the church that the moderate changes it was making in youth ministry was not enough to keep up with the fast-paced changes happening in the world. He felt drastic measures needed to be taken in the methodology and framework of youth programming in order to better connect with the upcoming generation.²²

At the turn of the century, Mike Yaconelli echoed Senter's concern, boldly arguing that the current state of youth ministry was having very little impact on students. Yaconelli, a leading voice in youth ministry, feared that the methods used by churches throughout the eighties and nineties had been an experiment gone wrong and argued that the church desperately needed to completely change the way it was doing youth ministry.²³ So what exactly went wrong?

²² Mark Senter, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 29.

²³ Mike Yaconelli, "The Failure of Youth Ministry," *Youthworker* 19 (May 2003): 64.

Andrew Zirschky, who runs the Center for Youth Ministry Training, blames the superficial tactics that are often used by churches to bring in crowds when adolescents are young, but fail to provide any spiritual substance that would retain them as they grow older. These programs often provide evenings filled with fun games and entertainment, then sprinkle in a pinch of biblical seasoning in order to call it ministry. Zirschky believes the answer does not lie in secular popularism or educational theory, but in practical theology. He compares it to a dance between what is theologically sound and the ever-changing circumstances and situations that surround the youth.²⁴ In other words, effective youth ministry should be centered around biblical truths, while also providing opportunities for the youth to understand why they should believe these truths and how they can live them out practically in today's culture.

In 2011, David Kinnaman, the president of Barna Group, expressed a concern that the church still wasn't making the necessary changes to shift away from the shallow methodology of youth ministry that focuses more on fun techniques that attract the masses yet fails to build disciples. His apprehension with the direction of the church revolved around the business model adopted by many attractional churches who focus more on entertainment than cost or sacrifice.²⁵ Jared C. Wilson confirms Kinnaman's concern by contending that the seeker-friendly, mega-church model that centers around consumer-driven methods may be growing, but its growth is "transfer growth."²⁶ The problem is not in church numerical growth, but in retention and deep rooted, spiritual growth. At the center of Wilson's premise is the reoccurring assertion that whatever a church chooses to attract people with is ultimately what they are attracted toward. His

²⁴ Andrew Zirschky, "Practical Theology as the Foundation of Youth Ministry," Center for Youth Ministry Training, accessed January 29, 2020, <https://www.cymt.org/practical-theology-as-the-foundation-of-youth-ministry/>.

²⁵ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 13.

²⁶ "Transfer Growth" is when the growth of a church is largely due to Christians transferring their membership from one church to another and does not reflect growth that comes from newly converted Christians.

plea is for the church to return to the gospel as the means of attraction, not the glitz and glamour of culturally relevant programming.²⁷

Andy Stanley emphatically disagrees. Stanley follows in the footsteps of Bill Hybels, who innovatively created an environment within his church that seeks to draw in unchurched people. He did this by stripping away the traditional aspects of the institutional church, leaving a more culturally relevant and appealing atmosphere that goes to great lengths to sell what he is marketing—Jesus. Stanley argues that every aspect of church needs to revolve around the potential consumer, the unchurched.²⁸ Stanley claims the exodus of youth and adults from church reflects the societal shift away from institutionalism and therefore warrants more of an attractional model. On the surface it seems that Stanley knows what he is talking about, based on the massive success of his church. The problem is that Willow Creek, the church of Andy Stanley’s predecessor Bill Hybels, has confessed that this attractional church model is not producing disciples and that many of its seasoned Christians are feeling stalled in their spiritual growth due to their shallow approach to doing church.²⁹

Gary E. Gilley cautions churches to use genuine discernment when embracing the template Stanley provides. He is deeply concerned that churches are compromising their theological and doctrinal principles, which are grounded in the gospel, with pragmatic trends and consumer-driven techniques that compromise the church more than it converts the sinner.³⁰

²⁷ Jared C. Wilson, *The Prodigal Church: A Gentle Manifesto Against the Status Quo* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 67.

²⁸ Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 111-149.

²⁹ Timothy C. Morgan, “What Reveal Reveals,” *Christianity Today* 52, no. 3 (March 2008): 27, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/march/11.27.html>.

³⁰ Gary E. Gilley, “Deep and Wide,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 19, no. 58 (Winter 2015): 308.

Allan Effa echoes Gilley’s sentiment and argues that churches need to worry less about being culturally relevant and instead understand that Christ offers a culture that often is countercultural to the norm or status quo. He asserts that too many churches camouflage themselves and dispense with everything that is too “churchy” in order to better connect with the secular world. This manifests itself when churches replace sanctuaries with theaters, cafes, and night clubs instead of inviting the secular world into what is holy, sacred, and Godly.³¹

There is a crisis facing many churches in North America concerning its young people. The Barna Group has shown that at the turn of the century only one-fifth of people in their twenties have maintained the level of commitment and spiritual activity they showed when they were in high school.³² Kinnaman has added, since this poll first came out, that close to sixty percent of young adults who were active in church at the age of fifteen have since stopped attending church. A more recent polling shows that as of 2019, only one-third of those eighteen to thirty-five years old attend church faithfully.³³ These statistics are both telling and alarming. They clearly show that the youth programming that focuses on entertainment may work while adolescents are in high school but is not preparing them to maintain a lifelong commitment to Jesus as they enter adulthood.

Kenneth A. Moser and Malan Nel agree that the evangelical churches of the United States are facing a historic crisis in their failure to retain young people. Their concern is centered

³¹ Allan Effa, “Pub congregations, coffee house communities, tall-steeple churches, and sacred space: the missional church movement and architecture,” *Missiology* 43, no. 4 (October 2015): 381-384.

³² Barna Group, “Most Twenty Somethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” *Millennials and Generations* (September 2006), accessed January 29, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years/>.

³³ Barna Group, “What Young Adults Say is Missing from Church,” *Millennials and Generations* (November 2019), accessed January 29, 2020 at <https://www.barna.com/research/missing-church/>.

not only on the astronomical rate at which youth are dropping out, but the fact that many are not returning to church even as they get older. At the heart of Moser and Nel's concern is the inability to create a balanced discipleship program that focuses both on the spiritual growth of those already in the church while also providing an emphasis on drawing in young people outside the church. They believe there must be a connection between the failure to produce longevity in the lives of young Christians and the failure of the church's youth programming. If youth ministry was able to connect its *identity*, which is to be discipled into the likeness of Jesus, with its *mission*, which is to bring others into this opportunity, then retention would be more feasible.³⁴

How did the church get to this place where entertainment took precedence over discipleship, presumably leading to this decline of youth and young adults remaining in the church? Moser and Nel believe it stems from the rise of three influential youth-focused ministries: Youth for Christ, Young Life, and Youth Specialties.³⁵ Torrey Johnson, the founder and leader of Youth for Christ, acknowledges that the aspirations of the ministry were influenced by the quality of entertainment the world provided. The events were engineered to reflect attractive gatherings that would appeal to youth.³⁶ Jim Rayburn founded Young Life with the same premise, that church should never be boring.³⁷ Wayne Rice and Mike Yaconelli also used the methodology of fun and entertainment as a launching pad for their ministry, Youth

³⁴ Kenneth A. Moser and Malan Nel, "The Connection Between Youth Ministry's Division of Evangelism and Discipleship, and the Lack of Retention of Youth in North American Churches," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (November 2019): 1-8.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Torrey Johnson and R. Cook, *Reaching Youth for Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1944), 36.

³⁷ Jim Rayburn, *Dance Children Dance* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers Inc, 1984), 62.

Specialties, which provided books, training, and resources for churches to help facilitate their youth programs.³⁸ These ministries all served a purpose and thrived at bringing countless youth to Christ, but they all centered around using any means of entertainment possible to be an attraction for youth.

This model may have worked for decades, but Senter and Yaconelli could both see the writing on the wall as the millennium came to an end and the exodus of young adults began to take place. Yes, this model was still attracting youth to church, but it wasn't creating the proper launching pad for them to remain in the church. Duffy Robbins, a professor of Youth Ministry at Eastern University, offers a roadmap to discipleship making that is modeled more after Jesus than pop culture. Robbins advances a critique on the contemporary methods that either revolve around a charismatic leader or rely heavily on bigger and better theatrics to compensate for a lack of spiritual depth. Instead, he stresses the importance of offering a variety of experiences that engage a person spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and experientially. By diversifying the methodology, the church is likely to impact more youth because everyone encounters God differently. By deepening the process, Robbins adds, youth ministry will begin to offer direction, not just instruction; tools, not just talk; and memories, not just meetings.³⁹

Literary and statistical research shows that there truly is a spiraling decline of young adults remaining in church.⁴⁰ This is not just an isolated problem at Martins Creek, but a broader epidemic that has infiltrated many American churches. Though there is some dissention, most

³⁸ Mark Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 251.

³⁹ Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples: A Small Book about a Big Idea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 163-168.

⁴⁰ Barna Group, "What Young Adults Say is Missing from Church," *Millennials and Generations* (November 2019), accessed January 29, 2020 at <https://www.barna.com/research/missing-church/>.

experts in youth ministry agree that this problem is attached to the shallow techniques used by churches to attract and entertain youth, while failing to deepen their roots with activities that engage and grow them mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. Though this broad revelation regarding youth ministry is evident in literature, there is a gap in literature that specifically addresses this from a catechetical point of view. This study will attempt to fill this gap. To do this, it is important to first understand the historical development of catechesis.

A Historical Account of Catechesis

The aspect of teaching and instructing others is clearly a primary component of faith found in Scripture, which will be established in detail under the section Theological Foundations found later in this chapter. This theological foundation culminates as Jesus concluded His earthly ministry by emphasizing the importance of teaching and baptizing new believers as He extended the Great Commission to His disciples. Though Jesus distinctly links baptism and teaching together under the precepts of discipleship making, many would maintain that the teaching does not have to precede the baptism. In fact, the stories throughout the book of Acts seem to articulate a pattern of immediate baptisms. So where does the concept of catechesis, the teaching leading up to baptism, develop?

Karl Koop believes that an extensive teaching process was not necessary in the baptismal accounts of Acts because the converts found in these stories were primarily Jewish or God-fearing Gentiles who already had a heritage built on a strong preexisting religious teaching.⁴¹ Many scholars would echo this contention, including Alan Kreider, who clarifies that the Christian movement quickly realized that a “far-reaching program of instruction and

⁴¹ Karl Koop, “Catechisms in the Mennonite Tradition,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 29.

resocialization” was needed when the church began converting biblically illiterate pagans in the second century.⁴² Too many new Christians were abandoning their faith when persecution and martyrdom became more prominent in the Roman Empire. In order to establish a deep-rooted faith that would not waiver under persecution, the church established an extensive process of catechesis to help these newly converted pagans better understand what they were joining. History records that with the second century came a longer and deeper catechesis that eclipsed what was seen in Acts.

Gregory Allison says the average length of catechesis in the early church was three years, but it ultimately depended on the maturity, conduct, and devotedness of the catechumen.⁴³ The primary focus had shifted from the ritual of baptism, as found in Acts, to the discipleship and spiritual maturity of the person being baptized. This was accentuated by individuals like Tertullian, a North African theologian who did not believe there was a need to rush into baptism, especially when it came to children. He wrote,

According to circumstances, disposition, and even age of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; primarily, however, in the case of little children...Certainly, the Lord does say about children, ‘Do not forbid them to come to me.’ Let them ‘come’ then, while they are growing up. Let them ‘come’ while they are learning, while they are learning where to come. Let them become Christians when they become able to know Christ. Why does innocent infancy rush to the forgiveness of sins?⁴⁴

⁴² Alan Kreider, “Baptism, catechism, and the eclipse of Jesus' teaching in early Christianity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no. 1 (January 1998): 7.

⁴³ Gregory Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 630.

⁴⁴ Tertullian, “On Baptism,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Volume 3 of *Early Church Fathers Series*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 669-681 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 678.

Tertullian believed discipleship was a process that should be prolonged, and that baptism could wait until this process was thoroughly completed—something unnecessary for children incapable of making this commitment.

Alongside Tertullian were other early theologians like Hippolytus, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Ambrose, Origen, and Augustine, who all contributed to the development of a strong catechetical system.⁴⁵ Michele Hershberger notes that this extensive catechesis involved exorcisms, prayer, mentorship with older Christians, instruction in biblical narrative, and an extreme focus on the ethical implications that would lead to moral transformation.⁴⁶ There is a consensus among most historians that this three-year catechesis, involving the teaching of the Word and doctrine combined with spiritual and moral formation, had become a norm in the early church. Gerald Baumbach is one voice, however, who extends a strong word of caution against the generalization that a lengthy catechism was a standard practice across the entire church.⁴⁷ He feels there is not enough documentation to make such broad generalizations.

In the third century, Cyprian began formulating the link between baptism and original sin, saying, “This recently born infant has not sinned except that, being born physically according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion/infection of the ancient death of his birth.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Lawrence D. Folkemer, “A Study of the Catechumenate,” *Church History* 15, no. 4 (December 1946): 286-307.

⁴⁶ Michele Hershberger, “The Baptism Ritual in a Postmodern World,” *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 135-147.

⁴⁷ Gerald Baumbach, *The Way of Catechesis: Exploring Our History, Renewing Our Ministry* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2017), 98-99.

⁴⁸ Cyprian, “The Epistles of Cyprian,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 5 of Early Church Fathers Series*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 275-420 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 354.

Cyprian believed delaying the baptism of an infant was a mistake and strongly advocated the idea of baptizing infants immediately after they were born. J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett note that with the indoctrination of infant baptism and the widespread illiteracy filling the cathedrals, the rigorous and lengthy catechesis of the early church became a rarity during the dawning of the Middle Ages. These two factors eventually led to the demise of a deep catechesis for the next thousand years.⁴⁹

When the Reformation arrived, a resurgence of a rich and vital catechesis flooded the church once more. Karl Koop says that with the Reformation came a new generation of catechisms primarily focusing on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the creeds, and additional sections on the sacraments.⁵⁰ Reformers like Luther and Calvin restored the practice of catechesis with multiple catechisms, some short and some lengthy. Within the Anabaptist movement, it was Balthasar Hubmaier in 1526 who wrote the first Anabaptist catechism, *Lehrtafel* (A Christian Catechism), identifying many Anabaptist distinctives.⁵¹

Jason J. Graffagnino says that before Hubmaier was asked by Martin Goschl to write a catechism, he believed the baptismal practice should simply consist of the following: (1) Hearing the Word of God preached, which leads one to repentance; (2) Public profession of faith; and (3) Baptism with water. This was the general practice of most Anabaptists during the early part of this radical movement. After the composition of his catechism, however, Hubmaier modified his baptismal practice to include the interjection of a fourth step, the instruction through

⁴⁹ J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 59.

⁵⁰ Koop, "Catechisms in the Mennonite Tradition," 30.

⁵¹ Jason J. Graffagnino, "Balthasar Hubmaier: The Theologian of the Anabaptists. Nikolsburg and Catechetical Instruction: A Labor of Love," *Perichoresis* 15. no. 4 (December 2017): 23-24.

catechization. This step was to be done before the final step of baptism would even take place.⁵² Though it is not clear how long the catechetical process was during this sixteenth century Anabaptist movement, it is clear that with the launch of Hubmaier's catechism, religious instruction before baptism was revitalized and sustained in Anabaptism for the next 500 years.

Karl Koop notes that in the seventeenth century the Dutch Mennonites regularly used various catechisms structured around memorization in a question and answer format. Using this layout, baptismal candidates would memorize up to two hundred answers in preparation for their baptisms.⁵³ This, however, shifted in most Protestant churches during the nineteenth century when the clergy-led catechisms were inadvertently sidelined, making room for the lay-driven Sunday school movement. With the introduction of Sunday school, Packer and Parrett contend that the doctrine and theology emphasized in catechisms were replaced with general Christian principles found in Bible stories. Denominational distinctives and doctrines have been further marginalized within the past fifty years as more nondenominational resources continue to be utilized and church growth programs cause churches to focus more on large crowds and less on discipleship.⁵⁴

When combined with the historical overview of Martins Creek's catechetical process described in the Ministry Context, this historical account of catechesis provides incredible insight into the oscillating development of catechesis from the early church to the current practices of Martins Creek Mennonite Church. This canvas, reflecting the peaks and valleys of catechesis, offers a glimpse into the past and a skeletal foundation that can be critiqued and

⁵² Graffagnino, "Balthasar Hubmaier," 30-31.

⁵³ Koop, "Catechisms in the Mennonite Tradition," 28-30.

⁵⁴ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 68-73.

expanded upon. With this foundation, this review of literature will now offer a critical analysis of some contemporary approaches to catechesis.

A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Approaches

Michele Hershberger says the average length of a baptismal class in the Mennonite church ranges between one to six months. She explains the dilemma many Mennonite pastors face in finding a satisfactory medium that honors the catechetical process and yet does not lose some of the initial excitement behind a person's desire to be baptized. When people ask to be baptized, many pastors believe participants should not have to go through a prolonged process that can stifle the passion behind their blossoming conviction.⁵⁵ It also may send a mixed message that a person has to meet a certain standard or criteria before he or she can be baptized.

Jos de Kock says many churches today want to hold to a biblical view of baptism, and ultimately choose to baptize quickly with very little instruction because this is what the Acts church appeared to do. He also argues that in a fast-paced culture, a long catechesis, as reflected in the early church and the Reformation, is not practical in a postmodern society.⁵⁶ Packer and Parrett add that with postmodernism comes the busyness of families; the liberal resistance to authoritative truth and instruction; and the over-programming in churches, none of which leaves room for lengthy catechisms.⁵⁷

The problem with a prompt baptism, however, is that it stands in direct contrast with the early church, who believed baptism and discipleship must be cohesively tied together. Alan

⁵⁵ Hershberger, "The Baptism Ritual in a Postmodern World," 135.

⁵⁶ Jos de Kock, "Promising Approaches to Catechesis in Church Communities: Towards a Research Framework," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 2 (May 2013): 197.

⁵⁷ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 10-12.

Kreider makes a case that the rapid growth of Christianity in the early church was largely due to the influential and attractive lives of the believers. He further argues that the bold witness attached to the Christ-like character reflected in Christians was ingrained in them through the transforming and lengthy catechetical process. In a time when Christians were being persecuted, the church understood that they needed to ensure a steadfast faith that would endure the harshest attacks and lures.⁵⁸ Even though the western church may not be experiencing persecution today, the shallow faith of a young believer is easily being uprooted due to the superficial teaching and discipling that is plaguing the churches today. The church may benefit from a slow fermenting teaching that can lead to deep rooted transformation, as Kreider contests.

Michele Hershberger argues the answer to catechesis in a postmodern era is somewhere in between these two views: Provide both the immediacy of the New Testament baptisms and the lengthy, countercultural catechisms of the second century. She believes youth today need a catechism that provides more than the doctrinal positions that have predominantly filled the catechisms of the past. They yearn to experience God and know how Christ's teachings can impact, influence and positively change their lives. This young generation wants to experience faith in action, and see firsthand how their faith can make a difference in the world. They are very spiritual, yet very practical.⁵⁹

Hershberger's push to combine *knowledge* and *experience* is reflected in many contemporary models of catechesis today. Though this is part of the underlying precept found in this study, it is important to precede with caution and understand the dangers of allowing

⁵⁸ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 19.

⁵⁹ Hershberger, "The Baptism Ritual in a Postmodern World," 135-147.

experience to be a primary component of a catechism. Albert Outlier believes Christian experience is vital in energizing the heart but adds nothing to the substance of Christian truth. He is suspicious of the subjectivity of a person's experiences and fears, if misinterpreted, these experiences can lead someone emotionally down a path that does not reflect biblical truths. Even though Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience are all legitimate sources of theological authority according to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, Outlier holds Scripture above the others as the primary authoritative source.⁶⁰

Though Chris Clements agrees that one should bring experience to the forefront of youth ministry cautiously, he proposes that experiential learning is essential in developing a better understanding of what is being taught. He uses Jesus's ministry as a model of experiential learning, where the disciples learned just as much from their experiences with Jesus as they did from His teaching moments. Often Jesus would use a real-life experience as an allegory to illustrate His teaching points. The perfect example of this was when Jesus washed His disciples' feet, teaching them the beautiful lesson of humility and servant leadership.⁶¹ Though Clements agrees that someone like John Dewey may not provide the greatest theological perspective, a lot can still be gleaned from him when it comes to educating youth. Dewey says, "An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory [because it] is capable of generating and carrying out any amount of theory or intellectual content, but a theory apart from an experience cannot be

⁶⁰ Albert Cook Outlier, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 10.

⁶¹ Chris Clements, "Experience and Christian Nurture in Youth Ministry," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 3 (October 2018): 22-46.

definitely grasped even as a theory.”⁶² Dewey’s philosophy of teaching shows that experiential learning can make something theoretical more concrete and applicable.

Experiential learning can bring information to life, providing an avenue for theological concepts to become life-changing characteristics that define a person. Alan Kreider mixes a historical model of catechesis with a contemporary flair by blending instruction with action, leading to a product that is deep and transformative. In this model, Kreider merges Scripture, creeds, church history, and theology with activities like service projects, mission trips, and spiritual disciplines. Kreider says that if churches can add opportunities where baptismal candidates can be in community with mentors or fellow pilgrims while participating in these experiences, it will further amplify these transformative experiences. The Spirit-filled glue that holds all this together is prayer, where students can address sin and addictions while being empowered to enter a lifetime of committed faith that is inaugurated by baptism.⁶³

Though the amount of Protestant-oriented literature focusing on catechesis is limited, there is an extraordinary amount of literature that offers a Catholic perspective. Joe Paprocki provides effective tools that are meant to help the Catholic Diocese perform catechisms but can cautiously be adapted within a Protestant church environment. Paprocki believes too many catechisms focus on information that does not lead to transformation. At the core of his book’s premise is the need to facilitate opportunities where baptismal candidates encounter the living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is evident in his argument that twenty percent of the catechesis should be spent reading information and eighty percent should be spent engaging in

⁶² John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1916), 144.

⁶³ Alan Kreider, “Baptism and Catechesis as Spiritual Formation,” in *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church*, eds. Andrew Walker and Luke Bretherton, 170-206 (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2007), 187-191.

experiences that bring what was learned to life. Though there may be some fundamental theological differences in the content, Paprocki and Kreider would both agree that the catechetical approach should not only include experiential learning but should also be centered around prayer.⁶⁴

In alignment with Paprocki and Kreider's bent toward a more experiential methodology of catechesis, Packer and Parrett provide one of the most in-depth approaches to a contemporary catechesis that is undergirded by both biblical and historical perspectives. They believe the framework of a catechism should provide opportunities for individuals to experience truth through learning; experience life through worship; and experience God's way through action steps.⁶⁵ The truth through learning process uses more traditional methods of catechesis, teaching and preaching. The life through worship process enables the candidates to draw in close to the Lord through prayer, worship, and other spiritual disciplines. Finally, the experiencing God's way takes place when the candidates engage in community, service, and outreach.⁶⁶

Robert J. Brancatelli offers a contemporary perspective on catechesis that does not side with Outlier's *Sola Scriptura* approach, but also disagrees with Packer, Parrett, Paprocki, and Kreider's experiential learning approach. He would argue that teaching, molding, forming, shaping, and even instructing feels manipulative and controlling. Brancatelli feels a transforming catechesis should liberate and set one free. This process is not orchestrated but instead comes out of a reality founded on emancipation and discipleship. Brancatelli's views expand an experiential

⁶⁴ Joe Paprocki, *Beyond the Catechist's Toolbox: Catechesis That Not Only Informs but Also Transforms* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2013), 4-5.

⁶⁵ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 124.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

catechesis beyond any attempts to relate church teachings and Scripture to a person's personal experiences. Within this reality, Brancatelli would not rely on the catechetical process to create an experience that encounters Christ, but instead, would help individuals remove the barriers that prevent the person from seeing and dealing with a multitude of encounters that have already taken place.⁶⁷

Though Brancatelli may offer a more philosophical look at catechesis, on the flip side of this coin, Mary Jo Wilt provides a contemporary outlook of catechesis that is not only practical but utilizes technology in the twenty-first century. She encourages church leaders to embrace the advances of today's technology, using it to create a virtual spiritual formation center that takes religious teaching beyond the physical walls of the church. She does not cast aside the value of using face-to-face methods, but instead, suggests these be combined with online methods. Through websites, digital recordings, and even social media, pastors can help bring formational exercises to the home, where families can tap into resources that provide supplemental input beyond what is taught in the modern-day "classroom."⁶⁸

Though their philosophies and approaches all differ, the common thread between all these contemporary catechetical thinkers is that catechisms should move beyond information relay and include experiences that might spiritually transform the baptismal candidates. They may disagree whether these experiences should be manufactured or involve modern technology, but they would all agree that with prayer, the church should explore ways in which the

⁶⁷ Robert J. Brancatelli, "Discipleship and the Logic of Transformative Catechesis," in *The Spirit in the Church and the World*, ed. Bradford Hinze, 219-244 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 239.

⁶⁸ Mary Jo Wilt, "Visioning for the Future of Catechesis," *Momentum* 41, no. 3. (Sept/Oct 2010): 73-75.

candidates may encounter the Living God. Techniques may change with time and culture, but fundamental principles rooted in Scripture never change.

Too many evangelical Christians flippantly dismiss the idea of catechesis because they associate it with Catholicism. There is a resurgence in the Catholic church regarding catechesis, which has led to a plethora of Catholic-based catechetical literature. The gap in literature lies in evangelical settings, specifically in Protestant churches who practice believer's baptism, like the Mennonite church. Arthur Boers, editor of the academic and Anabaptist journal, *Vision*, agrees that there is a gap in literature concerning catechesis in the Mennonite church.⁶⁹ Too many pastors struggle with finding resources for their baptismal classes and settle for a thrown-together curriculum. Mennonites may be able to learn from their Catholic brothers and sisters, or at the very least, from the historical examples presented in the early church or Reformation. Another literary asset that can be utilized by the Mennonite church comes out of the various Discipleship Training Schools (DTS).

Global Disciples, Youth With A Mission, the Alpha Course, Koinonia, REACH, VidaNet, and many other mission-based ministries all combine instructional and experiential learning in their programs to enhance the transformational experiences of their participants. Though these programs traditionally have been used to train and prepare short- and long-term missionaries, they can be an excellent resource for the local church to learn from when considering how to better equip new believers to become more committed disciples. Research needs to be done in evaluating whether these models could be effectively implemented in the local church as a catechism. That is partially what this thesis project will attempt to accomplish.

⁶⁹ Arthur Paul Boers, "Catechesis," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 3.

In conclusion, the hope of this study is to use this review of literature as a launching pad to help address the problem at Martins Creek Mennonite Church and many other churches—the lack of depth and transformability in the catechetical process today. This review has shown that youth ministries that focus primarily on entertainment are not producing a faith that is sustainable as these youth become adults. This has been a huge contributing factor to the problem presented in this study. This review has also shown the historical development of catechesis and how it was founded on the principle of producing resilient disciples whose faith could withstand any societal hardships, including persecution. Finally, this review showed that many contemporary approaches to catechesis promote combining traditional teaching with experiential learning activities in order to reinforce and apply the main components that are being taught. With this literary foundation established, this chapter will now focus on the theological and theoretical foundations that can also be used to build and synthesize a better catechetical process.

Theological Foundations

Central to this study is the theological foundation of Scripture that validates the significance of catechesis as it relates to the spiritual formation of new and young believers. Without this foundation, this study risks the warning of Gamaliel, who said, “for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.”⁷⁰ Religious teaching that is not grounded in Scripture can lead to heresy and conceptually can lead to failure. A foundation built on the will of God, however, will withstand the turbulent pressures of this world and will not be overthrown. A catechesis that bases its content and approach on biblical principles will not only thrive, but it

⁷⁰ Acts 5:38 (ESV) Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to transform lives. In this section, a theological foundation of experiential catechesis will be established using the following criteria: (1) An Old Testament Foundation of Teaching; (2) A New Testament Foundation of Teaching; (3) The Correlation Between Biblical Teaching and Catechesis.

An Old Testament Foundation of Teaching

Though the Christian-oriented word “catechesis” comes from the Greek word, *Katecheo*, which means “to teach or instruct,” the concept of religious teaching can ultimately be traced back to the Torah. The word Torah is typically translated “the law,” but derivations of the word are also translated as “direction,” “guidance,” “teaching,” or “instruction.”⁷¹ As God prepared Moses to be His ambassador of deliverance, Scripture says He *taught* Moses what to say.⁷² This unique Hebrew word for taught, *Yarah*, literally means “to pour out” and gives the visual image of God pouring out the knowledge needed into the mouth of Moses.⁷³ Moses was encouraged to do the same to various appointed leaders in Exodus 18:20, which says, “teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do.”⁷⁴ The Lord was *pouring out* His wisdom to Moses, who was being used to *pour out* this divine wisdom to others.

⁷¹ I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd Edition (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 893.

⁷² Exodus 4:12 says, “Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.”

⁷³ James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1890).

⁷⁴ New Revised Standard Version Bible, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

Leviticus 10:11 clarifies that this was done to set a precedence that all statutes and decrees would be taught to the people of Israel.⁷⁵ The enslaved Israelites were leaving the pagan culture of Egypt and about to enter a land also filled with godless heathenism. For an entire generation, God was *pouring out* a firm foundation for His chosen people as they wandered in the desert, teaching them how to live a righteous life through the law. At the heart of this groundwork was the expectation that the law would be instilled in their hearts through cyclical teaching. The teaching that was extended to the next generation in Deuteronomy, however, would provide a different image than the *pouring out* that was done to Moses.

In Deuteronomy 6:7, the Hebrew word used for “teach” is *Shanan*, which literally means “to sharpen,” giving a vivid image of one sharpening a blade.⁷⁶ This imagery doesn’t seem as flowing or natural as the picture of wisdom that was being *poured out* to Moses. Instead, it connotes a demanding process that took hard work and time. The teaching that is being emphasized in Deuteronomy implies a methodology of repetition where the knowledge is continually impressed upon the next generation so that it becomes ingrained habitually in their nature. This was to be reinforced every day in multiple ways, so that the product was a sharpened life that reflected the Word of God. At the heart of this sharpening is the command to diligently teach their children to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might.⁷⁷ These matters were

⁷⁵ Leviticus 10:11 says, “and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.”

⁷⁶ James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1890).

⁷⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4-7 says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

not simply left for the “teachers” of the faith community but were to be undertaken by everyone so that every adult Israelite was to be a teacher.⁷⁸

Jesus later acknowledges that Deuteronomy 6:4-9, known as the Shema, contains the greatest commandment given by God. What one is told to do with the greatest commandment should never be taken lightly. What did God say to do with these imperative words? First, there was an expectation that individuals would embrace the command to love the Lord completely on a personal level before they attempted to instill this into the next generation. Once this was accomplished, however, God made it clear that this command should be *taught* to the children. This was the pattern, to impress it upon oneself first and then to teach it to others. Patrick Miller says Deuteronomy is a book entirely devoted to the divine instruction of the next generation.⁷⁹ God did not merely want Israel to memorize a list of laws. Instead, He wanted them to fully understand why the laws existed and how these commands could transform their lives and draw them into a loving relationship with their Creator. This is at the heart of God’s command to love Him and to teach others to do the same.

There are many parallels between circumcision and baptism. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant made between God and Israel. Baptism also has been an external sign that symbolically reflects one’s commitment to the Lord. Circumcision was meant to be a reminder of God’s covenant with Israel and the promises attached to this covenant passed on from one generation to the next. The act of baptism has also been passed on through the generations as a reminder of the eternal promises attached to the new covenant, established by Jesus.

⁷⁸ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2012), 143.

⁷⁹ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpretation: Deuteronomy* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 104-107.

Circumcision was a way of embracing individuals as members of God’s family. Similarly, baptism has often been coupled with membership into the family of God—the church. One could then draw a parallel between the significance of Deuteronomy as a form of catechesis attached to circumcision just as the church connects formal catechetical teaching to baptism.

Through the writings of Moses, the celebration of feasts and festivals, the psalms and songs, and even the placement of stone altars, God provided teaching tools that could be used to help Israel’s future generations remember and pass on the truths He instituted. These teaching tools provided avenues that connected the future generations with the past. This becomes evident when considering Scriptures like Deuteronomy 6:20-21, which starts by saying, “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt....’” A similar Scripture is when Exodus 12:26-27 says, “And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover....’” In Joshua 4:6-7, it says, “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord....” These Scriptures show the intentionality of the statutes, festivals, and stone altars, which were meant to creatively engage the senses, stir the emotions, and spur conversations that could lead to a deeper understanding of the past.

The importance of teaching was also ingrained in Israel through the historical, wisdom, and prophetic literature found in the Old Testament, preserving a deep theological understanding of God’s will through His Word. Job 32:7 says, “Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom.”

Psalm 78:5-7 says,

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the

children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

Solomon pointed to the life-giving significance of teaching when he said, “The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life.”⁸⁰ A foundation of teaching was firmly established in the life of Israel, equipping them to live a life of obedience, discipleship, and faithfulness.

Clinton E. Arnold believes the ethical teachings found in most early catechisms are rooted in this rich Jewish tradition of teaching found throughout the entire Old Testament. Arnold says the Didache, for example, makes teaching references to the “two way” tradition that is also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁸¹ Gerald F. Baumbach believes the Old Testament lays the foundation for religious teaching in passages like Psalm 78:1-4,⁸² which includes catechetical elements like: (1) Teaching; (2) Listening; (3) Words; (4) Parables; (5) Recounting; (6) Generational Sharing; and (7) Deeds and Wonders of the Lord.⁸³ The wisdom literature found in books like Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are filled with a strong emphasis to teach and to learn. Ultimately, the essence of religious teaching is rooted in the commands given by God in the Torah and emphasized by God in the wisdom literature of the Ketuvim.

A New Testament Foundation of Teaching

By the first century, rabbis were revered as the great scholars or teachers of Scripture. Since there were no formal seminaries, rabbis would take the best students and disciple them by

⁸⁰ Proverbs 13:14.

⁸¹ Clinton E. Arnold, “Early Church Catechesis and New Christians' Classes in Contemporary Evangelism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 1 (March 2004): 43-44.

⁸² Psalm 78:1-4 says, “Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.”

⁸³Gerard F. Baumbach, *The Way of Catechesis: Exploring Our History, Renewing Our Ministry* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2017), 19.

teaching and showing them how the Torah should be interpreted. These disciples would not only follow their rabbi's teaching but would commit to living with their rabbi so they could be formed into a mold of obedience to God. This level of commitment would involve a thorough understanding of the Scripture with a heightened expectation that much of the Torah would be memorized. As these young scholars rose to the status of becoming a rabbi, which meant "great," "superior," or "master," they were expected to choose a new generation of disciples and teach them the ways of the Torah.⁸⁴ Teaching Scripture to everyone was a priority in first-century Jewish culture, but for the select few who would become rabbis, learning it was an all-encompassing way of living.

Amid a culture of rabbinic discipleship, Jesus disciplined twelve uneducated men, whom He appointed to be His apostles. They were all ordinary people who would have been overlooked by every esteemed rabbi of the day and yet they were each handpicked by Jesus. These disciples referred to Jesus as "teacher" or "rabbi," because He used a very practical, applicable, and experiential approach to teaching. Jesus used parables, life's circumstances, analogies, people, and objects to open Scripture and pave a way for God's Word to be understood, embraced, remembered and lived out. Glenn James says there are over eighty events where Jesus encouraged His listeners to interactively engage. James notes that by diversifying these approaches, Jesus was able to meet the variety of needs of everyone more effectively within their particular context.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ray Vander Laan, *In the Dust of the Rabbi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 24-26.

⁸⁵ Glenn James, Elda Martinez, and Sherry Herbers, "What Can Jesus Teach Us about Student Engagement?" *Journal of Catholic Education* 19, no. 1 (September 2015): 129-152.

For example, Jesus used the image of a treasure, a pearl, yeast, and a mustard seed to point to a greater understanding of the Kingdom of God. By diversifying the analogies, it allowed the various listeners to connect with the most identifiable and relatable image that helped them each best understand the heart of the message. With each analogy, a clearer picture was revealed. Jesus was a master storyteller, but He also used experiential learning to engage the listener. For example, He used personal experiences they could identify with, like fishing, to help them understand their calling. He even used the actions of others, positive or negative, to point to a deeper appreciation for God’s Word. Beyond His compelling words, Jesus continually used experiences to amplify and solidify His teaching.

One of the most beautiful experiences that demonstrates this came on the night before His crucifixion when Jesus used foot washing and two key elements of the Passover meal to help His disciples understand the purpose and necessity of the cross. As Jesus removed His outer garments and took on the posture of a servant by washing His disciples’ feet, the purpose of His incarnation became clear. Paul expressed it best when he described how Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”⁸⁶ The bread and cup symbolically pointed to His body and blood, becoming a daily reminder of His sacrifice and redemption. From that moment forward, the water basin, bread, and cup would forever be engraved on the minds and in the hearts of His disciples. These actions would impress upon them a memory—not simply a memorized collection of words. A memory that can be visualized will often create a lasting impression that will surpass any words spoken.

⁸⁶ Philippians 2:7-8.

Teaching was a vital part of Jesus's ministry. The litany of teaching moments that filled His ministry beautifully combined well-articulated words with memorable experiences, producing a sharpened blade that penetrated the souls of anyone fortunate enough to experience it. This is the sharpened teaching experience that Deuteronomy 6:7 refers to that was masterfully orchestrated by Jesus. Yes, He passed on a deep understanding of Scripture through divine instruction and preaching, but Jesus often coupled His words with experiences that would transform lives and could easily be passed on to future generations.

Jesus provided a model of teaching that was meant to be received and reciprocated. With the experience of foot washing, Jesus told His disciples, "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."⁸⁷ As the students became the teachers, there is no question that they not only modeled servant leadership, but tapped into three years of learning under the Master to aid them in their call to preach and teach to the nations.

In Acts 1:8, just before Jesus ascended to heaven, He told His disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." What followed was the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the dynamic preaching and teaching of Jesus's disciples. After one sermon given by Peter, Acts says that 3,000 people came to embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior.⁸⁸ As the church continued to grow, the people "devoted themselves to the

⁸⁷ John 13:13-15.

⁸⁸ Acts 2:41

apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”⁸⁹ The Book of Acts clearly shows that the emphasis of teaching that consumed a large portion of Jesus’s ministry was passionately continued in the ministries of His disciples. The religious teaching, aided by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, created a movement that led to the exponential growth of the church. At the heart of this movement was the indoctrination of disciples making disciples who made more disciples.

Though Paul was not a disciple of Jesus during His earthly ministry, he was “appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher.”⁹⁰ His epistles provide a bulk of the New Testament teachings, articulating a doctrine of life, hope, and truth. Within Paul’s letters, he stressed the significance of exhortation and spiritual growth through teaching. This is best exemplified in his letters to Timothy where he implores him to “command and teach these things”,⁹¹ then continues by stressing, “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching”.⁹² Paul cautions Timothy, saying, “Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.”⁹³ He continues to warn Timothy by saying, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching”.⁹⁴ Paul provides similar pleas in his other letters, emphasizing the importance of being obedient to God’s call to teach His Word.

⁸⁹ Acts 2:42.

⁹⁰ 1 Timothy 1:11.

⁹¹ 1 Timothy 4:11.

⁹² 1 Timothy 4:13.

⁹³ 1 Timothy 6:2-4.

⁹⁴ 2 Timothy 4:2.

The Correlation Between Biblical Teaching and Catechesis

The Bible provides strong theological evidence that teaching the doctrinal truths of God’s Word is eminent, and that experiential teaching is exemplified by the greatest teacher to ever live—Jesus Christ. Yet how does this correlate with a theology of baptism or catechesis? The concept of catechesis, the religious teaching leading up to baptism, is grounded in the Great Commission. Jesus commanded his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁹⁵ Shortly before Jesus ascended to heaven He commanded His apostles to make more disciples, then clarified how this was to be done—through a process of teaching and baptizing. Though Jesus did not provide a sequential order here, He did make it clear that teaching and baptizing should coexist with each other when producing new believers.

Dirk Philips, an Anabaptist leader and an associate of Menno Simons,⁹⁶ believed it was explicitly clear that the apostles first preached the gospel and taught the people, which then led to the people’s repentance and decision to be baptized. Pointing to the early church, Philips argued that a systematic teaching of the gospel should always come before baptism. He said, “Hence it is incontrovertible, both according to the ordinance and institution of the Lord, and the custom of the apostles, that teaching the gospel must precede baptism. From the teaching comes repentance and faith.”⁹⁷ This was a direct repudiation of infant baptism, which modeled the act of baptism coming before any religious teaching. Anabaptists believed this was an abomination and stressed

⁹⁵ Matthew 28:19-20a.

⁹⁶ Menno Simons is the namesake by which the Mennonites trace their Anabaptist heritage.

⁹⁷ Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 184.

the importance of baptism only coming on the heels of teaching. Out of this interpretation of the Great Commission and the Acts of the Apostles comes the Mennonite understanding of catechesis and the significance of having a firm foundation of teaching leading up to baptism.

When studying the Book of Acts, the sequential order of teaching before baptism seems clear. In Acts 2, after Peter's Spirit-filled message, the disciples baptized 3,000 new believers in Jerusalem. Later in Acts it talks about Samaritans being baptized (8:12), an Ethiopian eunuch being baptized (8:36), Saul being baptized (9:18), Gentiles being baptized (10:48), Lydia and her household being baptized (Acts 16:15), and a jailor and his family also being baptized (Acts 16:33). Just as Jesus had commissioned, the early church baptized all new believers in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. These narratives all point to a sequential pattern of people first coming to faith through teaching and then consequently choosing to be baptized.

The baptism of infants reversed this pattern and started a theological feud over the sequential order of baptism and teaching that is still being debated today. There is no Scripture that specifically says the church should baptize infants. The Scriptures that are often used to validate infant baptism are Acts 16 and Matthew 19, but this is a stretch because neither of these passages mention the baptism of infants.⁹⁸ For example, in Acts 16 it simply talks about families and households being baptized, but there is no specific mention of any infants or children being a part of these family or household units. To assume this is dangerous exegetical work. Even the usage of Matthew 19:13-14, where Jesus proclaims the kingdom of heaven belongs to children, says absolutely nothing about baptism.

⁹⁸ Acts 16:31-33 says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family." Matthew 19:14 says, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

There are, however, multiple Scripture references that connect baptism with the faith choice of a believer.⁹⁹ J. Mark Beach, an avid supporter of infant baptism, admits, “The sequence for the operation of salvation that prevails in the New Testament is contrary to the theology and practice of baptizing infants, for that sequence consists of gospel preaching, the hearing of gospel preaching, confession of faith, and then water baptism.”¹⁰⁰ Because infants are incapable of hearing and understanding the gospel message and confessing their faith, it is premature and inappropriate to baptize them. Using the same passage in Matthew 19, it makes more sense to argue that children inherit the kingdom of heaven simply through their innocence than it does to insert baptism into the passage when it is flagrantly missing.

Jesus spent three years exemplifying a model of teaching that led to the transformation of many lives, particularly the apostles. The discipling and teaching these apostles experienced would have shaped the framework of Jesus’s commission to also make disciples and teach His commands. What followed in the Book of Acts was a pattern of preaching, teaching, and baptizing during the genesis of the church as these new believers “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.”¹⁰¹ The Great Commission was fulfilled by the apostles as they opened the minds and hearts of the people with clear teaching, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Though the Scripture lays a foundation that emphasizes the importance of teaching, and the Great Commission couples this teaching with baptism, it would be the next generation of Christians who would establish a strong theology of catechesis. As expressed in the Review of

⁹⁹ Acts 2:14-41, 8:12, 8:36, 9:18, 10:48, 16:15, 16:33 are just a few examples where they were first taught and then were baptized.

¹⁰⁰ J. Mark Beach, “Original Sin, Infant Salvation, and the Baptism of Infants” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 12 (January 2001): 47-79.

¹⁰¹ Acts 2:42.

Literature, the early church developed a lengthy and extensive catechesis in order to build up a firm foundation of Christianity that could sustain persecution. This catechesis was modeled after the discipleship process of Jesus, who invested three years in His disciples. These three years were filled with a wide variety of teaching moments that culminated with the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Since the number three has notably influenced many aspects found in Scripture,¹⁰² it would be easy to legalistically focus on the number instead of the overarching significance behind the number. Often the number three is used to signify completeness or provide a sense of finality. In the context of time, it indicates an extended period that often culminates with the completion of something momentous. Therefore, it should not be argued that a church's discipleship program should last three years simply because Jesus's ministry lasted three years. The most important conclusion is that the gospels make it clear that the spiritual preparation of Jesus's disciples took a significant amount of time. Scripture simply wanted to acknowledge that it was not an immediate occurrence, but instead, that it took time. In terms of Jesus's ministry, it took time because there had to be a shift in the mindset of the disciples to get them to the point where they better understood the will of God and how this would ultimately transform the way they would think, act, and believe.

The early church also saw value in investing significant time in the development of a new believer where they would see significant changes in the person before they were baptized with water. Ultimately, it is the ministry of Jesus as expressed in the gospels that provides the perfect

¹⁰² Some examples include the Holy Trinity; the three patriarchs in Israel's history; the three sacred objects found in the Ark of the Covenant; Jesus's inner circle of Peter, James and John; and Jesus's resurrection on the third day. Leviticus 19:23, 25:21, Deuteronomy 14:28, 26:12, 2 Samuel 13:38, 21:1, 1 Kings 2:36-38, 10:22, 22:1-5, 2 Kings 19:29, 2 Chronicles 17:6-7, Isaiah 16:14, 20:3, 37:30, Daniel 1:3-5, Amos 4:4, Luke 13:7, and Galatians 1:18 are just a few examples of events that revolved around the time of three years.

model of catechesis. Not simply because of the specific length of three years, but because of the importance of taking time to develop the spiritual habits needed to lead to a greater understanding of God's Word. With this comes a greater awareness of God's presence; a more intimate relationship with Jesus; a deeper sense of community; a more established foundation of faith, discipline and obedience; and a more profound and tangible call to turn around and make more disciples.

Theologically, a foundation has been established using Scripture to assert that teaching is a fundamental command instituted by God in the Old Testament and observed by Israel leading up to the New Testament. Jesus continued to emphasize the importance of teaching by not only exemplifying it masterfully throughout His ministry, but also by commissioning His disciples to teach everything He commanded. This set into motion a precedence of teaching that would be obeyed and modeled throughout the entire New Testament. When Jesus inaugurated the Great Commission, He commanded his apostles to couple teaching with baptism as they made new disciples. Finally, the church in Acts modeled a sequential pattern for this command by first preaching or teaching to unbelievers and then baptizing them as they decided to embrace Jesus as their Lord. This provides a theological foundation, highlighting the importance of implementing a catechesis that reflects the discipleship process of Jesus, just as the early church did.

Theoretical Foundations

With a theological foundation for catechesis established, it is now important to consider the theoretical foundations of various catechisms from the perspective of believer's baptism. Some argue that because the Acts church modeled a more evangelical approach that led to immediate baptisms, lengthier catechisms are not essential. Others turn to the early church's model of a longer and more extensive approach to catechesis. Beyond the length, the content and

mode of catechisms are also important to consider. Scripture, creeds, prayers, sacraments, worship, testimonials, and life experiences have all historically been used as tools for catechisms. Memorization, implementation, recitation, and transformation have all been ways of measuring the receptivity of these tools. It would be a lengthy and tedious endeavor to represent every catechism performed throughout church history. Instead, this section will focus on four overarching themes that encompass many Mennonite catechetical experiences: (1) Emotional; (2) Mental or Intellectual; (3) Spiritual or Formational; and (4) Experiential. These themes stem from one's choice to be in relationship with God based on a response to Christ's command to love the Lord with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength.¹⁰³

First, a catechesis often taps into a response of the heart that can be very emotionally based. This kind of response is often witnessed during revivals, when dynamic speakers or musicians end with an altar call, inviting people to either renew or begin a relationship with Jesus Christ. In a similar way, some pastors designate a service when baptisms will be administered to anyone feeling called. After a riveting, evangelical sermon, a pastor provides an invitation for people to come forward for baptism.¹⁰⁴ Pastors who use this model would argue that this is what was exemplified throughout the Book of Acts, when Peter and others gave a Spirit-led sermon followed by immediate baptisms. Though there may be years of spiritual growth leading up to this service, the decision to be baptized is often contingent on an emotion-led response to the various elements of the service. This writer is not denying the work of the Holy Spirit but is simply acknowledging the emotional connection that is present in certain

¹⁰³ Mark 12:30.

¹⁰⁴ Though this process is not common, it is still practiced by some Mennonite pastors including *Pastor E*, whose philosophy of catechesis and baptism will be discussed further on page 71.

catechetical experiences, even if this experience is encompassed within a single message or service.

Second, a catechesis often includes a mental or intellectual component to its approach that appeals to the mind. Almost every catechism involves information transfer where Scriptures, prayers, doctrines, and creeds are studied, explained, and perhaps memorized. These baptismal classes are often organized in a classroom-style learning environment, using books, pamphlets, or documents as tools to survey Scripture or doctrinal statements of faith. Students may recite memorized Scriptures, statements, ordinances, or questions and answers in front of the teacher or congregation before they can be baptized. The length of these classes varies and is often determined by the length of the content being studied. In many Mennonite churches, books like *God's Story, Our Story*¹⁰⁵ are used, which provide a survey of Scripture and an overview of doctrinal beliefs, church history, sacraments, and Christian virtues.

Third, a catechesis can sometimes involve spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is the process by which a person repents and undergoes a sanctification process that leads to a life of obedience and submission to the Holy Spirit. Though it may be difficult to measure a person's spiritual formation, it should be evident as he or she produces the fruit of the Spirit.¹⁰⁶ With an overarching focus on spiritual formation, the catechetical process culminates when a person outwardly reflects a spiritual transformation that visibly displays Christian virtue and character. In some Anabaptist circles this would involve the choice to embrace a plain lifestyle, representing a humbled spirit that separates oneself from the corruptible ways of the world. In

¹⁰⁵ Michelle Hershberger, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁶ Galatians 5:22-23.

other Mennonite churches, like Martins Creek, it would simply produce a spiritually renewed person who strives to reflect the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Finally, a catechesis often involves experiences that help shape and mold a person, thus strengthening their faith. Churches sometimes weave into catechisms opportunities, events, or activities that enable a person to experience the Living God. This may include aspects like spiritual disciplines, retreats, spiritual gift inventories, anointing, intercession, volunteering, or even short-term outreach or mission trips. These are not merely manufactured experiences, but they do often involve positioning a person beyond their everyday normal aspects of life so they may encounter God. These experiences stand as markers which help shape a person's testimony and elevate their relationship with God in a tangible way.

David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock explore what makes a young believer become a resilient disciple of Christ.¹⁰⁷ Kinnaman and Matlock have statistically analyzed eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds who grew up in the church, placing them in four categories as they reach adulthood: (1) Prodigals, who no longer claim to be Christians; (2) Nomads, who no longer attend church; (3) Habitual Churchgoers, who attend church frequently, but do not engage in beliefs or activities associated with disciples; and (4) Resilient Disciples who attend church frequently, trust in the Bible, consider Jesus as Lord, and express a desire to impact others due to their faith. Only ten percent of those surveyed fell into the category of resilient disciples.¹⁰⁸

Kinnaman and Matlock provide key elements that distinguish these resilient disciples from all other young adults. Many say they have experienced Jesus in a way that brings them

¹⁰⁷ David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019).

¹⁰⁸ Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 33.

deep joy and satisfaction, where Jesus speaks into their lives and worship becomes a lifestyle. They also claim the church provides avenues where they can draw a direct correlation between the truths found in the Bible and the issues they face in life. Most resilient disciples feel they belong in church and have older adult friends who encourage them spiritually. A mass majority say their gifts are being utilized, and they have a strong sense of purpose and calling for their lives. Finally, Kinnaman and Matlock say most of these young adults have a desire to be used by God for mission, witness, and outreach that leads to changed lives in today's world.¹⁰⁹

Kinnaman and Matlock's research shows that if the local church can provide an avenue for youth to experience Jesus, see the relevance of the Bible, feel like they belong, have a sense of calling, and be used to impact the lives of others, they have a heightened chance of becoming resilient Christians as adults. With this in mind, Martins Creek has developed a discipleship program that connects its youth with adult mentors and leaders who will usher them through a ten-part spiritual formation series spread out over four months, covering many of these core values and more. The program, entitled Encounter 2020, covers the following topics: (1) Biblical Survey; (2) Biblical Study; (3) Intimacy with God; (4) Spiritual Disciplines; (5) Spiritual Warfare; (6) Spiritual Gifts; (7) Personal Calling; (8) A Life of Obedience; (9) The Purpose of Church; and (10) The Great Commission.¹¹⁰ The participants have also engaged in various spiritual formation activities, including the exploration of spiritual disciplines, an overnight retreat, a spiritual gifts inventory, a prayer and anointing service, one-on-one mentoring, and a cross-cultural experience.

¹⁰⁹ Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 36-37.

¹¹⁰ These topics reflect the studies found in *Faith for Exiles* and are a conglomeration of topics taught at Discipleship Training Schools like YWAM, REACH and Global Disciples.

For years, Martins Creek left it up to youth to request baptism and then responded by enrolling them in a catechism class that merely focused on doctrinal beliefs found in a book. This was a catechetical process that was producing Habitual Churchgoers¹¹¹—at best. Unfortunately, it was also producing a lot of Nomads.¹¹² In the dawn of a new era, when young believers growing up in the church are not maintaining their faith, significant changes to youth programming need to happen. Knowing many are not seeking baptism on their own, and thereby not committing their lives to Jesus, Martins Creek has taken proactive steps to disciple its youth through programs like Encounter 2020.

Encounter 2020 is not a typical baptismal class. It is a discipleship process designed to nurture young believers into a deeper commitment, and therefore prepare them for a lifelong commitment with Christ associated both with their baptismal vows and the concept of resilient discipleship. This discipleship process reflects the experiential teaching of Jesus and the extensive catechesis of the early church, setting these young believers up for greater resilience in adulthood. The question to consider is whether or not this discipleship process can be considered a catechism. Catechesis is defined as the religious teaching associated with the fundamental, doctrinal, and ethical content of the Christian faith in preparation for baptism. It is the opinion of this writer that the content, activities, and structure of this discipleship program thoroughly prepares a person for a lifelong commitment to Jesus and therefore is the perfect tool for catechesis.

¹¹¹ Habitual Churchgoers attend church frequently, but do not engage in beliefs or activities associated with disciples. Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 33.

¹¹² Nomads consider themselves Christians but no longer attend church. Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 33.

There are many similarities between a baptism and a wedding. In any relationship, it starts with a budding friendship that grows into love and eventually leads to a deeper commitment for one another. A wedding is a public declaration of a couple's decision to make a lifelong commitment to one another that is sealed with wedding vows. In a similar way, a baptism is a public declaration of one's decision to make a lifelong commitment to Jesus, which is sealed with baptismal vows. Just as people should not rush into marriage until they fully understand what they are committing to, research shows that individuals who rush into baptism are less likely to become resilient in their faith.¹¹³ A wedding day does not mark the beginning or pinnacle of a relationship and therefore a couple should not impulsively get married or wait to get married until after their relationship is deemed "perfect." Similarly, people should not impulsively choose to be baptized nor should they feel compelled to wait until their lives are deemed "perfect."

This analogy demonstrates the importance of both premarital counseling and catechesis. Premarital counseling will not make or break the marriage, but it should provide a forum where a couple can grow in their understanding of what they are committing to while also providing tools that can better equip them for a more successful marriage. Similarly, a catechesis may not make or break a person's journey of faith, but it too should provide tools that can better equip a person's faith to become more resilient. A vital aspect of this thesis project is to analyze the most effective tools used in the catechetical process that can engage a person emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and experientially; and in the process, be a more effective launching pad for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. The next chapter will further explore programs like

¹¹³ Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 60-61.

Encounter 2020, as well as other catechisms administered by Mennonite congregations to determine what tools are most effective at making resilient Christians.

Chapter 3: Methodology

To discern and develop a deeper and more transformative catechesis at Martins Creek Mennonite Church, this project conducted qualitative research within the broader church and the local church. The qualitative research done in the broader church included interviews with ten seasoned pastors exploring the catechetical spectrum found within Mennonite churches in Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network. The purpose of this research was to identify a variety of essential elements and effective tools utilized within Mennonite catechisms. The results will be construed by a cross-analysis of common themes within the broader church interviews in conjunction with the intervention plan that was done locally.

The intervention plan was conducted at Martins Creek, where a discipleship program was developed incorporating many of the key elements and strategies gleaned from the literature reviewed. This program had fourteen participants who consented to be interviewed for this project. The purpose of this intervening aspect of the research was to evaluate whether a longer, deeper, and more experiential catechesis that focused more on discipleship than information-transfer would be embraced by its participants and ultimately lead to a more committed walk with Christ. These two sets of interviews were analyzed to find common themes and distinctives found within the responses that can be used to synthesize a more effective catechism moving forward. Information collected from both sets of interviews will be thoroughly described within this chapter and the results will be presented in Chapter Four.

Models of Catechesis in the Broader Church

The purpose behind this part of the research was to identify any essential elements and effective tools gleaned from ten different pastors based on their years of experience in working with young and new Christians entering into a lifelong commitment with Jesus through baptism.

Key leaders of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network were emailed about the project asking their permission to conduct interviews with at least ten of their ordained pastors. Once the letters of consent were received by these leaders, a phone call was made asking for their input in discerning qualified pastors that could provide an elevated spectrum of views on the discipleship process leading up to baptism. These recommended pastors were contacted by email and given a general overview of the project and clear guidelines surrounding the interview process. Of the thirteen pastors contacted, ten consented to be interviewed. Three did not respond. Consent forms, found in Appendix B, were emailed to each pastor along with contact information regarding the Zoom call. The interviews were done over a Zoom call due to the recent coronavirus pandemic, which prevented any in-person interviews from taking place. This allowed the interviews to be recorded for accuracy and continued analysis. Each interview took about forty-five minutes.

All pastors who were interviewed had at least ten years of pastoral experience in Mennonite churches that have traditionally placed a high emphasis on discipleship and baptism. Their combined years of experience added up to over 266 years, offering a wealth of knowledge and insight into the most indispensable and effective tools and content needed to help prepare young and new believers for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. Though younger pastors may provide a more contemporary approach to discipleship, the knowledge gleaned from these pastors' formational experiences with discipleship provided the data needed to help synthesize the most effective elements of a catechesis.

Five questions helped shape the interview: (1) How are baptismal candidates solicited in your church? (2) What content, elements, sources, and activities are incorporated within your baptismal classes and which of these have proven to be most effective or ineffective? (3) What is

the structure of these baptismal classes, including length, context, and instruction? (4) Do you believe there is a greater correlation between the commitment level of the program or the individual going into one's baptism that produces a higher level of commitment coming out of one's baptism? Explain. (5) Would you value a curriculum published by the broader church and if so, what should be in it? These questions provided a catalyst for these pastors to speak into the process they have developed and fine-tuned over the years. Though their names will be kept confidential, a summary of their interviews will follow.

Pastor A

Pastor A has had twenty-one years of ministry experience, including five years of working as a missionary overseas. These years overseas intrinsically shaped how he discipled his new and young believers. At the heart of his catechesis is a nine-month discipleship class the church requires all youth take as they enter their teenage years. The design and structure of this class, offered during Sunday school, is strongly modeled after the Global Disciples approach to discipleship. This class is taught by multiple teachers and includes the following topics: Who is God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit); Creation; Sin; Salvation; the Bible; Gifts of the Holy Spirit; Being a Disciple; Faith vs. Works; Spiritual Disciplines; Whole Life Stewardship; Spiritual Warfare; What is the Church; Church Discipline; Baptism; Communion; Kingdom Citizenship; Peace and Justice; Family, Singleness, and Marriage; Worship; Witness and Discipleship; Suffering; Anabaptism; and Discovering God's Will.

During these nine months, the pastor invites guests to come and give their testimonies based on the topics being shared. These testimonials provide a variety of faith stories and perspectives while also bridging relationships between the young participants and the seasoned saints of the church. In addition to the teaching, the youth take a weekend trip that is designed to

open their eyes to other cultures and perspectives on Christian formation, spirituality, worship, and discipleship. This trip includes a visit with an Ethiopian pastor and a worship experience in a charismatic church. They meet with leaders of Lancaster Mennonite Conference, Eastern Mennonite Missions, and Mennonite Central Committee to gain different perspectives on the global church. They also visit a Mennonite Information Center in Pennsylvania to visually see the history and heritage of the Mennonite church. Finally, they watch a biblically based performance at Sight and Sound Theatres to see the Bible come to life through the arts.

After this nine-month in-depth discipleship process, the participants meet with the pastor to discuss whether they are ready to be baptized. When they are ready, they must go through an additional four-week membership class that also takes place during Sunday school. This may be with adults who also wish to join the church. The primary emphasis in this class is on the doctrines of belief found in the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. Though *Pastor A* believes there is a direct correlation between the length, depth, and expectations attached to the catechetical process and the level of commitment extending beyond a person's baptism, the magnitude of that commitment is ultimately determined by each individual participant. Depending on the maturity of the person and the seriousness by which he or she enters into the process, each individual person will determine the level of transformative growth that takes place in the end. He adds that even though it is up to the individuals to take full advantage of the opportunities presented to them, it is up to the church to provide ample opportunities for spiritual growth.

As *Pastor A* reflects upon the entire process, he believes the most transformative experiences happen on the weekend trip. Not only does it provide an avenue for him to personally connect with the participants over an extended period of time, it is also a tremendous opportunity for them to be stretched beyond their comfort zone so their eyes may be opened to a

greater appreciation for Christian living. This spiritual stretching also takes place in the teaching sessions that focus on spiritual gifts and spiritual warfare. *Pastor A* is continually tweaking this process, and, in the future, he plans to add mentorship to the program to enforce discipleship, accountability, and follow-up after each participant is baptized. Though *Pastor A* would value any curriculum provided by the broader church, he would only use it if it fits into the existing process he has worked hard to develop over the years.

Pastor B

Pastor B has been in the ministry for forty years. Part of his pastoral experience was in South America where the church practiced a long and rigorous catechesis that culminated with baptism when the participant showed adequate knowledge of the Bible and reflected great moral character. In this context, new believers craved discipleship and whole-heartedly engaged in any ministry the church offered. Coupled with this spiritual hunger was a strong desire to belong to the church and a commitment to develop Christ-oriented habits that led to spiritual transformation. The catechesis classes often would take years, similar to the expectations surrounding new believers in the early church. *Pastor B* acknowledges that this extensive form of discipleship worked in the global south because it reflected their insatiable desire to follow the “shining path,” which is fundamental to their culture. In North America, however, he feels a three-year catechetical process may be too demanding for people to buy into. When he began pastoring stateside, the catechetical process he chose was closer to six months.

Within this six-month process the baptismal classes are offered during Sunday school for the convenience of those participating. He admits, however, that having them for ninety minutes would probably be more conducive for growth. The primary focus is on Kingdom values, Jesus’s teachings, Paul’s letters, and Anabaptist distinctives. *Pastor B* says he has a desire to take his

baptismal candidates from a place of intellectually “knowing *about* Jesus” to a journey where the process ends with them experientially “knowing Jesus.” With this as one’s focus, *Pastor B* says there must be a higher emphasis on spiritual disciplines. Anecdotally, *Pastor B* says he has witnessed a lot of fruit from the labor that has gone into his in-depth catechesis. He has seen participants whose families were once casual in their church attendance become extremely committed, telling their parents, “I don’t want to miss church.” This Foundations Class, as he calls it, provides a pattern of commitment that has been embraced by participants moving forward beyond their baptisms. He has also had parents and grandparents express, “I wish we had something like this when we were younger.”

Some key elements within his catechetical approach include having multiple teachers present the sessions so that the progression of topics can stay fresh and the energy can remain high throughout the six months. There is also a high expectation placed on the work the participants are asked to do, and with this heightened expectation often comes a heightened experience that leads to transformation. Though *Pastor B* sees the value in the broader church providing resourcing, he does not believe it should come in the form of published material that can become stagnant and dated. Any material offered, he believes, should be presented electronically so that it can continue to be expanded, changed, and adjusted.

Pastor C

Pastor C has also been pastoring for forty years and attributes his high baptismal rate to his church’s dedication to make the act of baptism a high priority. When youth enter junior high, they receive a personal letter from the pastor that highlights the importance of baptism. Baptismal classes are repeatedly publicized from the pulpit and in the church bulletin. Elders and parents are encouraged to have continued conversations with the youth about baptism. Sermons

regularly weave in the significance and importance of being baptized. The church intentionally creates a culture that highlights and celebrates the commitment surrounding baptism, so that youth are excited to partake in this rite of passage. When they do individually make the decision to be baptized, they participate in a thirteen-week long class that primarily focuses on the twenty-four articles found in the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. The sessions include the following topics: Jesus Christ and Discipleship; Scripture and Christian Spirituality; Sin and Salvation; the Church of Jesus Christ; the Church in Mission; Baptism, Communion and Footwashing; Ministry and Leadership; Congregational Relationships; Christian Stewardship; and Peace and Justice.

Pastor C believes it is essential to use the Bible as the primary source of material. He requires each candidate to read the Gospel of Mark and keep a journal about what is read throughout the whole process. Originally, *Pastor C* held these classes during Sunday school, but found that the time was not long enough to adequately cover the material. So he switched to meeting Sunday evenings when he could take at least ninety minutes for each class. He also made it a requirement that at least one parent attend the classes. This opened the door to a higher level of commitment and a greater buy-in not just from the baptismal candidates, but also from their entire families. It created an avenue for the lessons to be expanded and conversations to be continued throughout the week, well beyond the ninety minutes done at the church. Elders and other saints of the church were also asked to participate in some of the weekly class discussions by providing personal insights and testimonials relevant to the topics. *Pastor C* tries to personalize the classes, so participants go beyond merely receiving information to having opportunities for personal connections and relationship to be established between the participants and other people in the church. He also has created a safe space for individuals to ask difficult questions they are wrestling with or to talk further about things they do not fully understand.

Pastor D

Pastor D has been pastoring for thirty-four years. He offers opportunities for individuals within his church to be baptized three times a year: Easter, summer, and Christmas. Leading up to each season, he places several announcements in the bulletin encouraging individuals to consider being baptized while also promoting the dates of the upcoming baptismal classes. Baptismal classes are offered during Sunday school over the course of five to six weeks. During the first session they are given a *Jesus Calling* devotional and are required to maintain a personal journal throughout the catechesis.¹¹⁴ During each class, participants are asked to share from their journals anything that was impactful along the way. The sessions include the following topics: Creation; Crisis; Covenant; Christ; Church; Coming; Church History; and Confession of Faith. These topics provide a summary of the Bible, church history, and significant Mennonite doctrines of belief. At the end of the class, a trip to the local Mennonite Information Center is taken along with lunch at a local restaurant where the pastor can connect with the participants informally.

Pastor D acknowledges that an increased level of expectation in the process can certainly lead to an increased level of commitment from the participants, but stresses that this must be individualized. The pastor believes any growth is good fruit, but sometimes the pastor must simply meet the individual where he or she is at, and for some, this may be at a place of limited spiritual maturity. He also noted that a higher level of maturity, both in age and spirituality, often correlates with an increased potential for spiritual impact, which can lead to a greater probability

¹¹⁴ Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence: Devotions for Every Day of the Year*, (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2005).

of transformation. *Pastor D* has gleaned material from multiple sources throughout his years of ministry and would embrace any new material the broader church would develop.

Pastor E

Pastor E was in ministry for twenty years and pastored one of the largest Mennonite churches in the United States. Due to the rapid growth of this church, he took a slightly different approach to baptism than some of the more traditional Mennonite churches. He believes churches should provide opportunities for individuals to spontaneously choose to be baptized. Every week he asked individuals to share a personal testimony during church, creating an atmosphere that stressed the importance of one's faith journey leading to a personal decision to be baptized. Every other month the church would offer baptismal services where people could come forward to be baptized. In these services, most of the people who were baptized made that decision that morning without any formal catechesis leading up to that decision. He was seeing hundreds of people coming forward every year, sometimes making the decision as a whole family unit, like the stories found in the Book of Acts.

This does not mean that *Pastor E* did not value the importance of discipleship—quite the opposite. His church was very intentional about creating a multitude of small groups where individuals could be discipled and find a space where their needs could be met. New people in church were encouraged to join a small group where they could acclimate into a Christian culture, which would then usher them into other small groups that would help meet their current needs. Small groups would center around issues like parenting, marriage, addiction, healing, and prayer. Though these were often geared toward new adult believers, the church was also very intentional about providing catechetical opportunities for youth raised in the church. These classes typically lasted four weeks long where participants were provided with mentors who

would disciple them leading up to their baptism and beyond. *Pastor E* is extremely excited about the potential of the broader church producing curriculum that focuses on new and innovative tools of discipleship.

Pastor F

Pastor F has been doing ministry work for seventeen years. He believes that if a church is going to create a culture that values baptism and church membership, it must begin the catechetical process early. As stepping stones into an intentional catechism, his church begins talking about what it means to be a Christian and what it means to belong to the church as early as third and fourth grade. This early preparation work stimulates constructive conversations about baptism by the time children are in upper elementary school. The pastor said that students have often made up their mind whether they want to actively remain engaged in the church by as early as fifth or sixth grade. So this pastor believes developing a culture of commitment early is essential in maintaining a strong commitment later in life. Having these conversations with the children can also affect their parents' attitude about faith commitments.

When youth are ready to be baptized, they enter a baptismal class that lasts six to eight weeks. Some of the topics covered include: An Introduction to the Class; What It Means to Be a Christian; Our Salvation; Our Baptism; Communion and Footwashing; Membership in the Body of Christ; Church History (including Anabaptism and the local church's history); Church Tradition; The Purpose of the Church; and The Mennonite Confession of Faith. *Pastor F* compares his church's baptismal class to premarital counseling, both being a critical and opportune chance to establish a strong foundation before stepping into a lifelong commitment. He notes that when participants take the catechetical process seriously it can bear some amazing fruit; but, like most things in life, it can only be as effective as the seriousness at which it is

taken. He plans to move toward an experiential approach to teaching, where youth can engage in more hands-on activities that produce a strong desire for evangelism and an awareness of the global church. *Pastor F* sees the value in the broader church providing solid resources which can be incorporated into his preexisting catechism.

Pastor G

Pastor G has been pastoring for fourteen years and is currently beta testing a three-year catechetical program being developed by a Mennonite professor. This program was inspired by the rigorous catechesis of the early church as described by Alan Kreider,¹¹⁵ alongside the lengthy catechetical process in South America shared by *Pastor B*. *Pastor G* is incorporating this three-year program into their Sunday school hour not simply as a catechism, but instead, as a discipleship program that anyone from church can participate in weekly. A strong foundation rooted in Scripture is established in the first two years, which leads to a third year that concentrates on developing formational habits that reflect this teaching foundation.

The program visually can be represented by a series of concentric circles with the Lord's Prayer at the center. After drawing out the many facets of faith found in this prayer, the course then leads into the teachings of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount. The program expands further into the next concentric circle by focusing on the entire gospel of Matthew, using the life of Jesus as a model of how Christians should strive to live. This ripples into the next circle, the salvation story, which shows how the Old Testament and Paul's letters all point to the gospel message. Finally, the participants enter the third year fully prepared to incorporate everything they learned into their lives through formational habits. The class is team taught by the pastor

¹¹⁵ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

and another individual, who each take two weeks at a time. The sessions are not lecture based, but rather are driven by questions that spur rich conversations led by the entire group, not just the teachers. These engaging discussions are possible because a diverse blend of new and seasoned Christians make up the class; it is not solely a catechism.

As the classes progress, there are continued conversations about baptism, giving those in the class who have not yet been baptized ample opportunities to discern their own decision to be baptized. Out of this experience, the church has seen some powerful transformations, including individuals who have overcome addictions and a couple who chose to be baptized on their wedding day. *Pastor F* hopes the commitment level attached to the longevity of the class combined with the content and activities will instill a deeply ingrained habit that will lead to a lifelong commitment once it is over. When this beta testing is finished, his goal is to evaluate the process and make any needed adjustments and changes before launching it into other willing churches who are a part of the broader church.

Pastor H

Pastor H has been in ministry work for twenty-seven years and is currently in the process of planting a new church. After pastoring a larger church for years and committing to many intensive discipleship relationships, *Pastor H* has experienced many success stories coupled alongside many painful ones that did not end well. In recent years, he has set out to explore what was missing in many of those discipling stories. He expressed frustration that the church would do a tremendous job of taking its people to a certain level only to find many of its members getting discouraged that the discipleship process would not continue to escalate. The church would generate a burning desire for spiritual growth but not always know how to take things to the next level.

He shared that the church's catechisms would point to the life and teachings of Jesus as a model of how Christians should live, ultimately culminating in the articles expressed in the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. This was rooted in three streams: (1) An Evangelical; (2) A Charismatic; and (3) An Anabaptist stream. The evangelical stream was committed to the authority of scripture. The charismatic stream exalted one's relationship with Christ and the active role of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the Anabaptist stream taught the significance of self-sacrifice and the pathway of Christ's suffering. These streams were weaved into the teaching and reinforced by the testimonies of guests who were invited to come and share intimate details about their faith journeys.

Lately, *Pastor H* has been exploring how these discipleship opportunities might culminate into deeper and more transformative experiences. With Philippians 2 as a guide, he is excited about the potential of meeting some of these needs through intentional relationships that can model Jesus in a way that have a rippling effect through small groups of Christians. This discipleship process involves connecting with each other; reciprocating to others what is received; developing spiritual growth based on where one is at in his or her faith journey; learning the significance of self-sacrifice and a call to evangelism; and establishing a life and moral foundation of strength. Out of this comes real authentic relationships so the participants feel like they belong to something that will carry them through their adult years. *Pastor H* would love to see the broader church provide resources for discipleship, but perhaps not in a traditional book. Instead, he would love to see some resource videos created or the publication of smaller pamphlets that could easily be weaved into existing programs.

Pastor I

Pastor I has twenty-five years of pastoral experience. Even though he ideally would like to see individuals come forward on their own accord to request baptism when they are ready, he recognizes that they often need a little encouragement. He publicizes the upcoming baptismal classes in the church's newsletter and often extends a personal invitation when appropriate. He uses the pulpit also as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of baptism. When individuals do come forward, he places them into one of two groupings, youth or adults, depending on their level of spiritual maturity.

For the youth, he uses online resourcing put out by Global Media Outreach called GodLife. GodLife produces a thirty-part series called, *The New Believers Guide*, which provides short introductory videos and enough resourcing to spur conversations around the following topics: God, Jesus, Salvation, the Holy Spirit, Scripture, Church, Prayer, the Gospel, and the Great Commission. These sessions take about ten weeks to walk through, and during this time candidates are paired with an adult mentor who will develop a relationship with them for at least one year after baptism. After they are finished with this series, they meet to discuss a document called, *What Is Baptism?*, published by Rose Publishing. Out of this discussion comes a final decision on whether to be baptized or not.

The more mature youth or adults are ushered into a program where they are given a packet that includes the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*, the Evana Covenant, and a three-part series from *The Timothy Plan*, which covers: (1) How to Walk with Christ; (2) How to Live in Christ; and (3) How to Grow in Christ. Though this resource is no longer published, the pastor uses it as a tool to help jumpstart rich conversations about faith. From here participants are matched up with a mentor who walks them through another publication of *The Timothy Plan*

series, which covers growth topics in the following areas: Assurance, Knowledge, Scripture, Prayer, Holiness, Witnessing, Fellowship, Temptation, Obedience, and Ministry.

These two groups meet on Wednesday evenings for ninety minutes, including a meal and at least one hour devoted to these sessions. *Pastor I* believes it is the church's responsibility to establish this foundation knowing that sometimes, depending on their level of spiritual maturity, there may not be any fruit that surfaces for some time. He recognizes the need for more discipleship and is drawn to the Global Disciples model, hoping to weave in some of their teaching strategies to his existing program. He expresses the importance of building bridges that interconnect young Christians with older Christians and warns that fragmenting these groups can lead to a disconnect amongst the youth that leaves them feeling lost as they get older. *Pastor I* would love to see more resourcing provided by the broader church in many areas, including baptism preparation classes and premarital counseling.

Pastor J

Pastor J has twenty-eight years of pastoral ministry experience. He regularly emphasizes the significance of baptism through his messages and through the celebratory atmosphere that surrounds the baptismal ceremonies. When someone approaches him requesting baptism, he extends an invitation to the rest of the congregation that a baptism and membership class is starting. He says he usually gets a few more that come forward asking to take part in the classes. The classes are comprised of six sessions, where they review and discuss their church's vision and the *Mennonite Confession of Faith* and also take a trip to the local Mennonite Information Center. The vision of the church focuses on the following topics: Salvation, Adventure, Volunteering, Equipping, and Discipleship, making the acronym SAVED. Baptismal classes are

held after church and candidates are asked to pack a lunch. The classes typically last ninety minutes.

Pastor J recognizes that those who take their faith seriously as they enter the catechetical process often leave it invigorated and excited about their faith. Those who half-heartedly enter the process generally leave with the same half-hearted commitment, which often has ongoing negative effects on their faith journey. He has been concerned with the number of baptized individuals who eventually leave the church as they get older. This has spurred a desire to revamp his catechesis and possibly interweave a more rigorous discipleship approach to his existing program. He is considering the possibility of requiring a discipleship program, like Saddleback's Life Development Process, as a post-baptismal experience.

This process is designed like a baseball diamond, where first base (Class 101) introduces new people to the life of the church and what it means to have a relationship with Jesus. They then advance to second base (Class 201) where they explore the different spiritual disciplines. The third set of teachings (Class 301) focus on spiritual gifts, abilities, personalities, and life experiences. Finally, home plate (Class 401) explores the importance of mission and service work and sharing one's faith with others. Though discipleship programs like Saddleback's are important, *Pastor J* feels the key to any catechesis is tapping into the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, no level of teaching will lead to spiritual transformation. He would love to see local pastors come together to develop a model of catechesis that could be beta tested in their churches moving forward.

The Intervention Plan of the Local Church

The local intervention plan consisted of two steps. The first step was to develop a longer, deeper, and more experiential discipleship program that could be offered to youth and young adults at Martins Creek. The second step was to interview all participants eighteen years and older who have already been baptized. The purpose of this interview was to compare the new discipleship program with their original baptismal class to determine which catechetical content and tools lead to a transformative experience that generates a greater level of commitment. Thirty-six personal letters were placed in church mailboxes, along with multiple flyers posted throughout the church and an announcement in Martins Creek's newsletter, all extending an invitation to all youth and young adults in the church to participate in this program. In the end, fifteen youth and young adults participated and six additional adults agreed to be mentors. Fourteen out of the twenty-one who participated met the requirements set by the Institutional Review Board and were contacted about participating in this project. All fourteen signed the consent form found in Appendix A and were interviewed.

A Description of the Church's Original Baptismal Class

The baptismal classes of Martins Creek have traditionally revolved around the reading of *God's Story, Our Story*,¹¹⁶ which provides a brief survey of Scripture, Christian and Anabaptist history, and Mennonite doctrine. The author, Michele Hershberger, is a respected Mennonite theologian who is the chair of the Bible and Ministry Division at Hesston College, a Mennonite two-year institution. The book is broken up into nine chapters and creatively offers within its

¹¹⁶ Michele Hershberger, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2003).

margins various comments derived from a panel group who read the book and provided insightful conversation starters. The baptismal class simply required the participants to read it and come to the class prepared to talk about what they read. Traditionally, this book could be covered within four to five sessions. The baptismal class concluded with a field trip to the local Mennonite Information Center where the group toured the 250 foot-long cycloramic mural depicting the history of the church and Anabaptism.

A Description of the New Discipleship Program

In evaluating many historical and contemporary models of catechesis found in literature, it seems to be a consensus among many writers that catechisms need to combine knowledge and experience. Based on the review of literature, Martins Creek developed a discipleship program entitled, Encounter 2020, which was designed to engage its participants emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and experientially through testimonies, teaching lessons, Scripture, and spiritual formation activities. The program took place in Martins Creek's Youth Center where everyone could easily spread out and sit at tables that were set up into a large square. The group met every other week for two hours on Sunday after church over a stretch of four months. It included ten teachings sessions that were taught by ten different individuals from Martins Creek who have passionately displayed attributes reflecting their given topics. Each presenter was encouraged to incorporate their personal testimony within their teaching lesson as a way of personalizing their topic and testifying to God's glory, while also building a bridge that opened the door for further conversations about faith.

With each topic, the participants were given take-home assignments that focused on spiritual formation activities they could work on for two weeks. The participants talked about these activities over lunch with their mentor groups, which were comprised of two or three peers

and an adult mentor. These conversations over lunch went from 12:00 to 12:30 p.m., and the teaching sessions would typically last from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m.. Mentors were also asked to check in on their group members at least once in between sessions. The sessions covered the following topics: (1) Biblical Survey; (2) Biblical Study; (3) Intimacy with God; (4) Spiritual Disciplines; (5) Spiritual Warfare; (6) Spiritual Gifts; (7) Personal Calling; (8) A Life of Obedience; (9) The Purpose of Church; and (10) The Great Commission. A twenty-four-hour retreat was held at a retreat center, focusing primarily on Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Warfare, Spiritual Gifts, and Personal Calling. The program was supposed to conclude with a weeklong cross-cultural trip, where the group would be working with inner-city refugee families. This had to be canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.¹¹⁷

The session on Biblical Survey provided a bird's eye-view of the entire Bible so each participant could have a general understanding of what the Bible is about and how it ultimately points to the salvation story of Jesus. It also wrestled with what it means for Scripture to be inerrant and God-breathed and yet have been written by a variety of people. At the heart of this session is an emphasis on how Scripture can impact a person's faith journey, speaking truth into their lives and providing them with a sense of purpose and direction based on God's will. The take-home spiritual formation activity was to choose a gospel to read in its entirety and journal about. Participants were asked to write down summary statements for each chapter and pay special attention to anything they never noticed before, anything that stood out, and anything that spoke to them personally.

The Biblical Study session took on a more microscopic view of Scripture. The main idea behind this session was to articulate how to study Scripture in a way that not only brings it to

¹¹⁷ A lesson plan describing the teaching content of each session is provided in Appendix D.

life, but also personalizes it for the reader. Specific Bible study tools were shared that could be used to help do word studies, offer commentary, point out themes, and enable the Holy Spirit to bring the Word to life. The spiritual formation activity they worked on at home was to choose one verse or passage within the gospel they just read and dwell on it every day for two weeks, using some of the tools they just learned to see what God drew out of it and how it spoke to them, and then journal about it.

The class session on Intimacy with God focused on what it means to consider Jesus as Lord and still have an intimate relationship with Him. Within this session there was a strong emphasis on sin and grace and the importance of repentance. The presenter also passionately shared about the importance of receiving God's forgiveness and how one can work at forgiving oneself and others. The participants were encouraged to spend time at home filling one page with a list of things that have prevented them from drawing closer to God, including any sins they are struggling with and any unresolved sinful acts others have committed against them. On a separate piece of paper they were supposed to write down any scriptures that speak into these lists and bring both sheets of paper to the retreat.

At the retreat, the lesson on Spiritual Disciplines provided a thorough overview of the following spiritual disciplines: Solitude, Prayer, Fasting, Worship, Study, Meditation, Service, Generosity, Submission, Confession, Guidance, Celebration, Simplicity, Hospitality, Self-Examination, and Journaling. A brief description of each was given alongside specific examples of how these disciplines can be carried out. They were given time that first night to discern three disciplines they would be willing to try for at least two months. The next morning, the session on Spiritual Warfare was given with a strong emphasis on the power of prayer. This session provided an overview of the spiritual realm and the acknowledgment that there is an enemy who

is trying to tempt humanity and lead them down a destructive path away from God. This session concluded with an opportunity for each participant to get rid of the lists they made two weeks earlier by burning them in a campfire, then spending time with God on a personal prayer walk, followed by participating in an anointing service.

The second half of the retreat focused on their Spiritual Gifts and Personal Calling. Some spiritual gifts that were described included: Knowledge, Wisdom, Faith, Healing, Miracles, Discernment, Prophecy, Tongues, Serving, Teaching, Giving, Exhortation, Administration, Helping, and Mercy. Within this time they were able to take a spiritual gifts inventory and discern what specific ways God was calling them to use their gifts. Time was also set aside when their mentors and peers could share what gifts they saw in them.

The Personal Calling session focused on how God can use people within the vocation they are being called toward and that a calling does not always have to lead them into pastoral or missional ministry. This session also talked about how to listen for the voice of God and how to know it is truly Him and not one's imagination, or even worse, the enemy's voice. This led to a conversation about how God can call or nudge people to do things daily and how they can spiritually grow through these God-appointed encounters. They were asked to make a timeline where they pointed out all the key moments in their lives when God shaped them and led them to this point in their lives, and then consider where God may be leading them from here. The retreat ended with some personal sharing and one-on-one meetings with their mentors.

The sessions resumed back at Martins Creek two weeks after the retreat, when the topic of A Life of Obedience was shared. Using Scripture, the presenter talked about what it means to be obedient and live a life that reflects Christ and His teachings. It acknowledged that the way a Christian chooses to live will either lead people to Christ or repel them away from Christ.

Morality, generosity, compassion, love, integrity, and faithfulness were central themes within this lesson, alongside the Fruit of the Spirit.¹¹⁸ They were asked to continue working on their spiritual disciplines as they prayerfully discerned which fruit they needed more of and what could be done to allow the Holy Spirit to bring more of that fruit into their lives. They also made some short-term and long-term goals of things that needed to be changed to lead to a more fruitful life.

One week after this session was given, the coronavirus pandemic swept through the nation and all church gatherings were canceled at Martins Creek for ten weeks. This prevented the group from meeting for a month until alternative plans could be developed and implemented. When the program resumed, the last two sessions were administered over a Zoom call. Though this was not the ideal way to conclude the program, the pandemic did help them slow down long enough to instill some of the spiritual disciplines they started.

The ninth session was on the Church, which ironically focused on the importance of coming together as a body of believers. It emphasized that being actively involved with church goes beyond simply attending Sunday morning worship. The presenter talked about how church creates opportunities for building relationships and being a part of a support community. Like in most aspects of life, this session stressed that to get the most out of church, people need to pour themselves into church. This means getting more involved in others' lives and getting more involved in the life of the church. The participants were encouraged to make a list of how they were currently involved with church and a separate list of ways they could improve their involvement. They were also asked to revisit their spiritual gifts and see if they were utilizing their gifts in church.

¹¹⁸ Galatians 5:22-23 says the Fruit of the Spirit includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The last session was on the Great Commission and what it means to be a disciple who makes disciples. Some key topics included evangelism, outreach, service, and missions, and how these avenues of the Great Commission can not only impact the lives being ministered to, but it can also change the lives of those doing the ministering. The leader shared about what it means to walk with someone and mentor them or disciple them into a deeper relationship with Christ. They were left with a challenge to find at least one person they were willing to come alongside of and disciple. A cross-cultural trip to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was supposed to follow this lesson and provide another avenue for them to be stretched and spiritually formed through short-term missions. This was canceled by Eastern Mennonite Missions due to the coronavirus pandemic, but hopefully, this trip can be rescheduled later.

Encounter Interviews

Upon completion of the program, fourteen Encounter participants consented to be interviewed using Zoom. To help guide the interviews, the following questions were asked: (1) Which class, your baptismal class or the Encounter 2020 class, would you say was more effective in preparing you for a committed relationship with Jesus and why? (2) Which elements of the Encounter 2020 class impacted you the most and how did these elements impact you? (3) Which parts of the Encounter 2020 class did you find unnecessary and why? (4) What elements should be improved upon or added to the Encounter 2020 class? (5) Do you feel the Encounter 2020 class transformed your faith in any way or helped you become a more committed Christian? If so, how? (6) Was the length of the Encounter 2020 class appropriate and how might this have helped or deterred your spiritual growth during the program? (7) Do you feel a person should participate in a program like Encounter 2020 before they are baptized? Explain.

Participant 1

Participant 1 said Encounter was better than his original baptismal class because it was more serious in nature. Looking back, he did not feel he took his baptismal class seriously, but felt Encounter created an environment that pushed him out of his comfort zone and pressed him to take some serious steps that enabled him to grow spiritually. The prayer walk taken at the retreat, the spiritual formation activities done between each session, the testimonies of the presenters, and the incorporation of spiritual disciplines all brought about a spiritual awakening in him that undoubtably led to a transformation. He said the program also equipped him to become a better listener, not only to the voice of God, but also to avenues God uses—like Sunday morning sermons. *Participant 1* has become more intentional about weaving in quiet time into his days since Encounter began and feels like he takes his relationship with Jesus more seriously. He attends church every Sunday and has chosen to be involved in the sound room, praise team, and mentoring junior high students. He believes Encounter should be required by all baptismal candidates, but that it should incorporate more discussion on baptism if this does take the place of baptismal classes. He said the four months flew by and the overall time commitment was not an issue. In fact, he strongly recommended that the retreat be extended an additional day.

Participant 2

Participant 2 was baptized later in life and therefore did not go through an extensive baptismal class, so he expressed that the comparison between the two was like night and day and that Encounter was by far better. He was very moved by the bond that developed between all the participants and contributed this to the length of the program and the opportunities to connect through the mentor groups and retreat. He felt the teaching sessions were all amazing, but he was especially moved by the lesson on spiritual disciplines. His spiritual walk with Jesus was strong

going into the program and so he did not feel like he personally experienced a transformation but knows others did and, at the very least, it reaffirmed his commitment. He is heavily involved with missions and is committed to discipling others. He strongly recommended this be the new catechism of Martins Creek but felt it should weave in more about baptism, membership, and Anabaptist history. He felt both the length of each class and the total length of the program were perfect.

Participant 3

Participant 3 felt Encounter 2020 was better than her original baptismal class because it provided practical tools that helped her spiritually grow and become a more committed Christian. She said the variety of topics, activities, and experiences helped deepen her relationship with Jesus. She felt the retreat was perfect because it forced her to get away from all the distractions and set aside a large amount of time to completely focus on God. About six weeks into the program, when she was taking some amazing strides to grow spiritually, she said she experienced some extraordinary spiritual warfare. Ordinarily this would have left her feeling scared and depleted, but she felt Encounter helped prepare her for this and equipped her to overcome the enemy's attacks and come out even more on fire for God.

She said the program has undoubtedly transformed her life and helped her realize how important it is to stay connected with God. She attends church faithfully every week and has hopes of using her future degree to volunteer at a pregnancy center. She says she is more motivated now to do daily devotions and regularly practice multiple spiritual disciplines. She wishes there would have been more time to meet with her mentor and that there would have been a booklet to take home and review after each session. She would recommend this replace the existing baptismal class and hopes many others will have the opportunity to experience this

program. She did not feel like it was too long. In fact, she misses meeting and wishes it would have been a little longer.

Participant 4

Participant 4 felt his baptismal class was a joke compared to his experience with Encounter. He remembers hardly anything from his baptismal classes, but believes Encounter will be a life-changing memory that he will never forget. The teaching sessions on Bible Study, Intimacy with God, and the timing of the retreat enabled him to connect deeper with God and release some difficult things he had been holding on to for too long. He says that a fire has been ignited inside of him that makes him want to go public with his faith and be more intentional about sharing Jesus with others. He would love to see more people take these classes in the future, including his family, and knows this would enable people to experience a transformation that will better equip them for baptism and a lifelong walk with Jesus. He would recommend a second retreat at the end of the program. He wishes there would have been an opportunity to take the cross-cultural trip but would like to do this individually even if the group cannot go later. He felt the length of the program was perfect and would not change a thing.

Participant 5

Participant 5 appreciated Encounter more than her baptismal class because it provided her with tools that equipped her to dig deeper into the Word and do a better job of weaving devotions into her life. She loved the genuine testimonies of all the presenters, which helped her realize how fortunate the group is to have something like Encounter when everyone is so young and has so much time ahead of them to continue to grow. She appreciated the retreat and how it incorporated intentional quiet time with God, which she needed. She did wish there could have

been more quiet time in each teaching session so they could spend time with God reflecting on everything that was taught. She also expressed a desire for a manual that could be taken home and studied in between each session. She would have appreciated a teaching session on Mennonite beliefs and doctrines. She did feel this was a transformative experience and would strongly recommend this be used as a catechism class moving forward. She attends church every week and is extremely involved with worship, missions, and community outreach. She felt the overall length of the program was perfect but wished some of the teaching sessions could have been longer so more discussion could have taken place.

Participant 6

Participant 6 felt the experience of Encounter was transformative and far outweighed his baptismal class, which was simply reading through a book. He particularly appreciated the spiritual formation activities assigned in between each session and the opportunities to discuss them with his mentor group. He felt the timing of Encounter was exactly what he needed to help prepare his faith to grow while in college. He now feels inspired to participate in an overseas mission trip, perhaps to Africa. He faithfully attends church every week and realizes now how to incorporate daily faith rituals into his hectic schedule so he can continue to grow spiritually even when life gets busy. He loved the different perspectives of faith that came out during the testimonies and felt he could connect better with those people because of their stories. He wishes there could have been a book for the program so that years from now he could revisit what he learned in each session. He said he does do this from time to time with his original baptismal class book. He would recommend Encounter for anyone wanting to be baptized and felt the length of the program was perfect.

Participant 7

Participant 7 felt Encounter was far better than her original baptismal class. Her baptismal class felt too much like school because they only studied a book. The variety of sessions and topics in the Encounter classes brought her faith to life and provided so many things to relate to and identify with that have helped her grow. She really appreciated the speakers and having the opportunity to “try out” what they taught through the spiritual formation activities. She said the retreat provided a variety of ways to better connect with God so that anyone who participated could find at least one thing that worked for him or her. One improvement she recommended was to provide more opportunities to connect with the mentor group. She also felt like the trip to the Mennonite Information Center, done at the end of her original baptismal class, was amazing and suggested incorporating that into Encounter if it is used as a catechism moving forward. She felt Encounter was transforming in that it opened her eyes to some spiritual disciplines that have helped her find purpose and made her more intentional about reading the Bible. One week after Encounter ended, she chose to volunteer at an inner-city ministry in Columbus, Ohio, and plans to do long-term missions after college. She faithfully attends church every week and is heavily involved with the youth group and worship team. She would recommend Encounter as a catechism for future candidates and felt the length was perfect and went by faster than she originally anticipated.

Participant 8

Participant 8 also recommended Encounter over her baptismal class but did acknowledge she appreciated the emphasis on baptism and church history associated with her original baptismal class. When it comes to in-depth discipleship, however, Encounter was far better. Encounter took her out of her comfort zone and made her set aside time for connecting with God,

which was exactly what she needed. A lot of what was shared she said she already knew, but the accountability attached with the activities helped her do the things she knew she should be doing, making it become very real. In other words, Encounter helped her put what she already knew into action. She attends church every week and has a calling to be in ministry, specifically working with discipleship. If this would become the future catechism class, she suggested giving more written assignments that can be turned in; incorporating more Mennonite beliefs and history; providing a teaching session on baptism; and maybe even providing opportunities for the participants to share their own testimonies. They had a chance to hear the testimonies of the presenters but never had a chance to share their own. She felt the length was perfect considering the amount of material that needed to be covered.

Participant 9

Participant 9 appreciated her original baptismal class but said she did not experience any spiritual growth from reading the assigned book. She felt Encounter's spiritual formation activities combined with the teaching sessions, especially the one on the Church, provided more of an opportunity for growth and highly recommended Encounter over her baptismal class. She had been looking for something for the past two years that could help her reconnect with God and said Encounter, "Opened my eyes back up to God's love for me!" In her original baptismal class she did not receive a mentor until after her class was over. She enjoyed having a mentor walk with her through the entire program of Encounter.

Some of the spiritual formation activities really stretched her and made her step out of her comfort zone. She said this was exactly what she needed going forward. Now she knows that the next time she is challenged to do something especially difficult it may lead to something extraordinary—especially when God is behind it. She attends church every week and is excited

to get more involved in church and see what doors God may open as she intentionally chooses to volunteer more. She loves helping with the little children during children's church and would like to participate more with praise team. The retreat made her recognize the importance of solitude and silence. It has also reinforced in her the need to slow down, make more time for herself and God, and read the Bible more. She noted that the one-month gap between sessions eight and nine was a little long, but otherwise, the length of the program was perfect, and it went by quicker than she expected.

Participant 10

Due to the amount of material taught and the variety of perspectives that surfaced through the different teachers, *Participant 10* said he would recommend Encounter over his baptismal class. He especially valued the lesson on Spiritual Disciplines because it helped him learn how to better connect with God and narrow down the number of things that spread him thin. He did appreciate having a book to take home during his original baptismal class and would recommend one be written for future Encounter classes. The retreat was an extremely powerful experience for him, and it inspired him to read his Bible more and create more time for solitude. He has gotten more involved with youth group since Encounter, attending every week, and eagerly volunteers to be on praise team whenever he is asked. His family lives farther away from church and no longer attends, but he is willing to travel and come by himself to stay connected. He wished the retreat would have been longer, but otherwise felt the overall length of the program and each class was perfect. It was a transforming experience for him, and he would recommend this approach to discipleship replace the existing model being used for catechesis.

Participant 11

Participant 11 would recommend Encounter over her original baptismal class because it provided very practical, yet amazing tools that can be used to deepen her knowledge and faith. Her baptismal class, she said, was just going over information found in a book. She expressed how much she loved the retreat, which allowed her to disconnect from everything long enough to hear God's voice and focus more on what was being presented. She also valued her mentor group and the encouragement, accountability and intimate discussions that came out of it. She said she experienced a transformation that has led her faith to go beyond a "Sunday Morning Thing" and be more relational as she has developed ways of personally connecting with God. She embarrassingly admitted that before Encounter, she never really took time to read the Bible. Encounter has inspired her to read her Bible every day and make time for daily devotions and prayer. She also, along with *Participant 7*, is volunteering for seven weeks in Columbus and has plans next year to do long-term missions with Eastern Mennonite Missions. She faithfully attends church every week and loves volunteering in the church's midweek ministries that help families overcome financial, relational, and spiritual issues. Some suggestions moving forward would be to incorporate more worship into each session and the retreat and to consider doing a teaching session on baptism if this is going to replace future baptismal classes. She felt the overall length of the program was perfect and would not change a thing.

Participant 12

Participant 12 felt the Encounter class left a greater impression on her than her original baptismal class. The retreat significantly impacted her life, and she believed it was extremely powerful for others as well. She loved listening to the wide variety of presenters, which kept everything fresh and interesting. She also appreciated the mentor groups and the bonding that

took place within these groups throughout the program. She mentioned repeatedly that God helped her grow as she was taken out of her comfort zone. This has emboldened her to not back away from the sometimes crazy and scary things God nudges her to do, knowing that God can use those experiences to further transform her life. She has been challenged to read the Bible more and hopes to continue connecting with others in her mentor group moving forward. She attends church faithfully every week and has a newly ignited passion for prayer, especially praying for others. She wished there would have been more time to spend in the mentor groups and suggested the retreat be spread out over two nights to provide a chance for more downtime. She also felt a teaching session on Mennonite theology would have fit in well with the program and suggested this be weaved in if it does replace the traditional baptismal class.

Participant 13

Participant 13 said his original baptismal class felt like a formality he needed to jump through to get baptized. Encounter, however, was so much better and provided an opportunity for true spiritual growth. *Participant 13* admitted that he struggled with his faith soon after he was baptized and regretted some of the choices he made as a teenager. He acknowledged that it may have been due to immaturity, but regardless, Encounter has opened his eyes to where God is now leading him on his faith journey. The retreat was a highlight and enabled him to step away from everything for a couple days to evaluate his life. The spiritual formation activity where he had to plot out his life, writing down every crisis of belief, enabled him to see where he has been and where God is taking him. He wished the retreat could have been longer. He also valued the different testimonies and said there was enough variety to identify with at least one topic or personal story. He faithfully attends church every week and has a passion for discipleship and Scripture. He suggested having a follow-up meeting down the road so there can be continued

accountability in the future. He would recommend this be a future baptismal class but feels like there needs to be a greater emphasis on what baptism means. He did like that the primary focus of Encounter was on discipleship, though, and not just “more talk.”

Participant 14

Participant 14 said she was twelve when she was baptized and felt like she did it because all her friends were choosing to be baptized at the time. She expressed concern that this may be true for a lot of people. When someone is simply going through the motions just to get to something in the end, they rarely appreciate or get anything out of the steps that are being taken leading up to that end result. She said Encounter provided an avenue for discipleship that focused on the process and not the end result. *Participant 14* believes that by not focusing so much on baptism, it removed the pressure to do something simply because everyone else was doing it and, in the end, allows them to focus more on the process.

She would highly recommend Encounter over her traditional baptismal class. She appreciated the retreat, which gave her an opportunity to connect with the others and with God on a more intimate level. She was very moved by the Intimacy with God session and appreciated the reoccurring emphasis on the Holy Spirit throughout the entire program. This was not a vital part of her learning growing up in the church. She felt the entire experience was very transforming because it helped her gain knowledge of how she can grow in her relationship with God. She has never spent a lot of time studying the Bible but now feels very equipped to do so and plans to do this moving forward. She wishes some of the sessions could have been longer, but overall felt the length of the entire program was good.

General Observations by the Researcher

Encounter was well received by the leadership team and congregation, who graciously offered prayer and financial support for the program. Months of prayer and discernment went into the topics and people chosen from the congregation to present the lessons. There was enough congregational hype going into the program that it raised the level of expectation of the participants, who eagerly and enthusiastically jumped into the program with anticipation that they would indeed encounter God through this experience. They seemed to fully engage in the teaching sessions, asking good questions and coming to each session with a physical posture that was open to the teaching. For example, they did not sit with their bodies leaning away from the presenters, with their arms crossed or with their heads down. Their facial expressions and body language reflected genuine interest and delight as they took notes and got involved. There were only two times when this was not the case. The first was the last session of the retreat when it appeared that many of them were exhausted and ready to go home. The second was during the last two sessions when the Zoom calls seemed to prevent them from fully connecting with the lesson.

When the presenters shared personal stories, some responded with tears, and all of them seemed genuinely interested in what was being shared. It was very evident that each presenter really poured a lot of energy and time into his or her presentation. This was partially due to the passion they individually have for their given topic, but also because this was their one chance during the entire program to vividly and profoundly share and they did so from a personal perspective—which meant their hearts were into it. The participants would always ask who was presenting next, creating some excitement and eagerness each time they met. The presenters all brought a different flavor to the program, reflecting different teaching styles and personalities.

Some would come with a PowerPoint presentation; others would sit and teach with more of a conversational approach; and others would stand and use a whiteboard or distribute handouts. The variety kept things fresh. During lunch, when they split up into mentor groups, the participants seemed to all get along with their peers and mentors and vice versa. There was laughter blended with genuine sharing and thought-provoking questions. In general, the participants all seemed to value the relationships established during these gatherings.

The retreat offered a nice blend of teaching, quiet personal time, light-hearted social time, and engaging activities. Every hour was packed with a lot of substance, perhaps too packed, because by the end, the energy level seemed depleted. An environment of transparency, vulnerability, and openness to God's movement led to deep sharing, chills, and sometimes tears. It was very evident that the Holy Spirit was moving throughout the entire time. The retreat center had a large meeting room and kitchen plus enough beds for everyone to have their own space. It was approximately one hour away from the church. The setting was perfect in that it was far enough away to truly be removed from the distractions of life, yet close enough to not require wasted time on the road. The amazing gift of warm weather in February was also another added and unexpected plus.

When the coronavirus hit the area and things began to shut down, it placed a damper on the escalating spiritual culmination of the program. Though the stay-at-home order helped provide ample quiet time for everyone to spend with God, it also prevented the group from meeting in person for the last two sessions. The Zoom call was adequate in providing an opportunity to finish, but it was a bit anticlimactic to end things over a computer screen after such an amazing retreat. It was difficult to emotionally engage in the lessons when people were being cast in from their bedrooms, basements, or dining rooms during a time when individuals

were already feeling isolated and disconnected from the world because of the stay-at-home orders. The pandemic also prevented the group from participating in the planned cross-cultural experience. This trip would have provided an opportunity for the group to bond together and experience God in a way that would place an exclamation point at the end of the program. Instead, it seemed to end somewhat abruptly. The hope is that this group will be able to do something together once things resume back to normal.

Some observable and measurable indicators which will help discern if there was an increased level of commitment with each of these individuals include the following: (1) Are they showing a steadfast or increased level of attendance or participation in church life? (2) Are they expressing a desire to get more involved with church or Kingdom positions, activities, or volunteer work? (3) Are they making any strides to advance their spiritual walk through a greater commitment to spiritual disciplines? These observable and measurable outcomes and changes will be evaluated and reported in the next chapter, along with a synthesis of best practices regarding the catechetical process.

Chapter 4: Results

In evaluating the data collected during the interviews described in Chapter Three, this chapter will encapsulate the results and synthesize the most effective ways of approaching the following categories: (1) The Solicitation of Candidates; (2) The Ideal Length; (3) Volunteerism; (4) Experiential Learning; and (5) Essential Content. Effectiveness will be based on whether there are measurable indicators that show certain catechetical elements lead to an increased level of commitment. The primary levels of commitment that were evaluated included an increase in attendance, volunteerism, and spiritual formation. The attendance being measured included Sunday morning worship and any church functions or discipleship groups such as Sunday school or youth group. Volunteerism included the personal involvement in any church-related or community-related positions or ministries. Finally, spiritual formation included reading the Bible, praying, or any other spiritual disciplines that demonstrated a heightened level of commitment to spiritual growth. The data being evaluated is based on the responses provided by both the pastors and Encounter participants, utilizing the reoccurring themes that surfaced during their interviews.

It is important to note that the interview questions were open-ended and did not provide predetermined choices. This created a platform for their responses to be more genuine in reflecting their actual experiences, instead of leading them with choices that failed to encapsulate what legitimately took place. Open-ended responses, however, can be more difficult to categorize when developing and interpreting any common themes between the different interviews. For example, if a person shared that he or she has become more intentional about incorporating solitude in his or her life, this was placed in the categorical theme of spiritual disciplines. Though they may not have specifically said they were more committed to spiritual

disciplines, their open-ended response fit best into that general category. Open-ended questions also leave room for silent responses. Simply because someone failed to mention that the retreat was a meaningful experience for them does not imply that it was not instrumental in their transformation process. This research will not put words into the mouths of those interviewed, however, and will only represent what was verbally expressed by each participant. This does leave room for the possibility that the data results reflect a minimal representation of what was expressed or experienced.

The questions were not intended to be leading or to create a response that was favorable to the thesis of this paper. The researcher tried to remain neutral and provide a safe space for honest answers and feedback to be openly expressed with little commentary, interruption or direction beyond the questions asked. The researcher acknowledges that he was an active part of the intervention plan and that this may have unintentionally produced a bias in the responses if the interviewees believed their answers should be affirming of the plan. This bias, however, should have been diverted due to his corresponding involvement in most of their original baptismal classes. With these potential discrepancies established, the following is a synopsis highlighting the results of the research conducted in the broader and local church.

The Solicitation of Candidates

It can be difficult to create an environment that encourages baptism while leaving space for individuals to come to this decision on their own accord. If a church is overaggressive in its solicitation, individuals can feel pressured into baptism prematurely. If a church is too passive, individuals may never take those steps toward baptism. Developing a culture of baptism that stresses the importance of this commitment without crossing that fine line where there is either individual coercion or group pressure is essential. None of the pastors interviewed practice a

“Rite of Passage” class that automatically places individuals in a catechism class at a certain age. Only two out of ten churches have programming which places students into an intentional preparatory class at a certain age. Neither of these classes, however, are catechism classes. They are either exploration classes or discipleship classes that act as stepping stones into catechisms if the individuals choose to go this direction.

Six out of ten pastors choose, instead, to create a culture of baptism within their churches by saturating opportunistic platforms with theological expositions and congregational invitations. The theological elucidations reflecting the importance of baptism are often weaved into sermons or Sunday school lessons. Announcements highlighting upcoming catechism opportunities are placed in church newsletters, mailboxes, and flyers, alongside personal invitations and conversations when appropriate. These platforms strategically keep the value of baptism at the forefront of the congregation’s awareness. All six of these pastors noted that when this is done regularly, it provides multiple opportunities for individuals to come forward on their own accord and often leads to a heightened level of interest in baptism.

Involvement in the Encounter program was an open invitation to all youth and young adults. The solicitation process included the utilization of several congregational platforms such as sermons, newsletters, flyers, and personal letters inviting the youth and young adults of the church to attend. As a result, 42 percent of this demographic volunteered to participate in the program. Though this is an increase from the 36 percent who came forward for baptism, it still represents a minority of those who were asked. One significant reason for this modest participation rate was the time of year it was offered. Over 16 percent of those asked could not participate because they were too far from church while at college. Another 14 percent said it

was an extremely busy time of year for them. This shows the importance of offering a program like this multiple times a year.

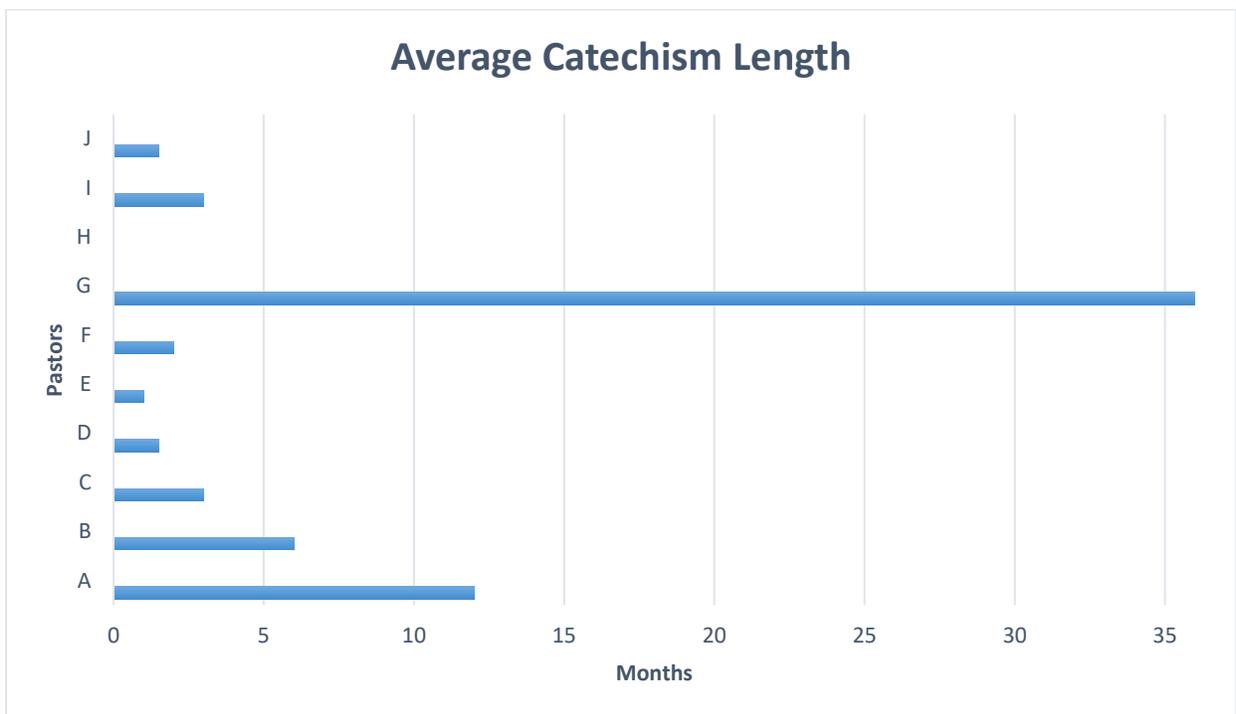
Even though 28 percent of those invited did not provide a legitimate reason why they chose not to participate in the program, the intentional solicitation seemed to be highly effective for those who were available. Also, the church made it clear that this program would be offered again later. This leaves room for individuals to participate when it best fits their schedule and readiness. This project's research points to the need for intentional solicitation through regular congregational reminders while also leaving room for individual choice. Two individuals who participated said they decided to get involved primarily because they received both a personal and verbal invitation. It shows that even though general invitations can be effective for most, some individuals need a gentle reminder that their presence is wanted and valued. Extending this personal invitation without group or authoritative coercion can help individuals enter the program with an openness that is vital to personal growth. In the end, these individuals felt led to participate, instead of feeling pushed into something they personally did not want to take part in.

The Ideal Length

If the catechesis is too short, it can send an inadvertent message that the steps leading up to baptism are either insignificant or inconsequential in the development of the person's faith journey. If the program is too long, it can intimidate or discourage individuals from getting involved due to the high level of commitment needed to follow through with the entire program. The length of each class session can also have detrimental effects on the spiritual formation of the baptismal candidates. Short classes can inadequately cover the amount of material needed to provide enough meat to effectively nourish those who are hungry for spiritual sustenance. Long and tedious sessions can leave the participants drained or bored, creating an environment that is

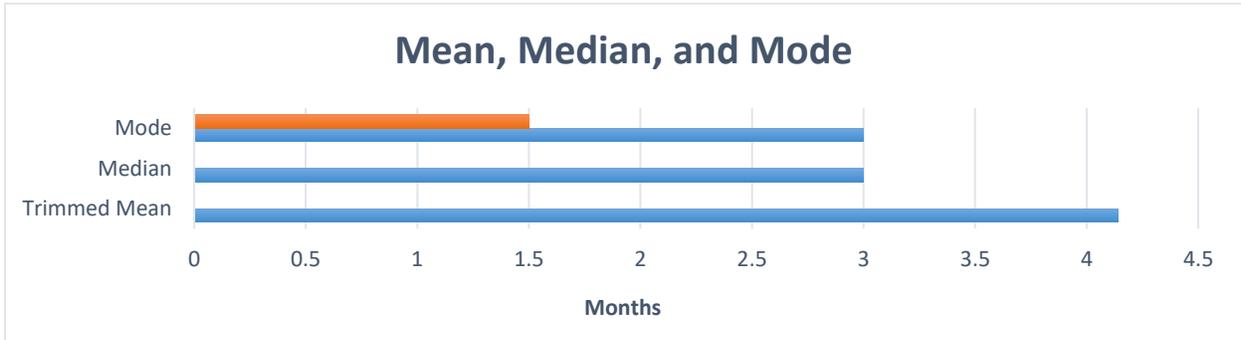
less likely to lead to transformation. Finding the ideal length and time that sufficiently accommodates the material needing to be taught while also accommodating the busy schedules of the participants and leaders can be difficult, yet vital to the success of the program. All these factors can play into a person’s decision to be baptized and should be evaluated when discerning what model of catechesis is most effective.

When meeting weekly, the average overall length of a catechesis is seven months long, according to the pastoral interviews conducted in this project. This, however, can be misleading because there is asymmetry within the data due to the extreme deviation between the mean and the highest outlier of thirty-six months. The deviation can be seen in the graph below:

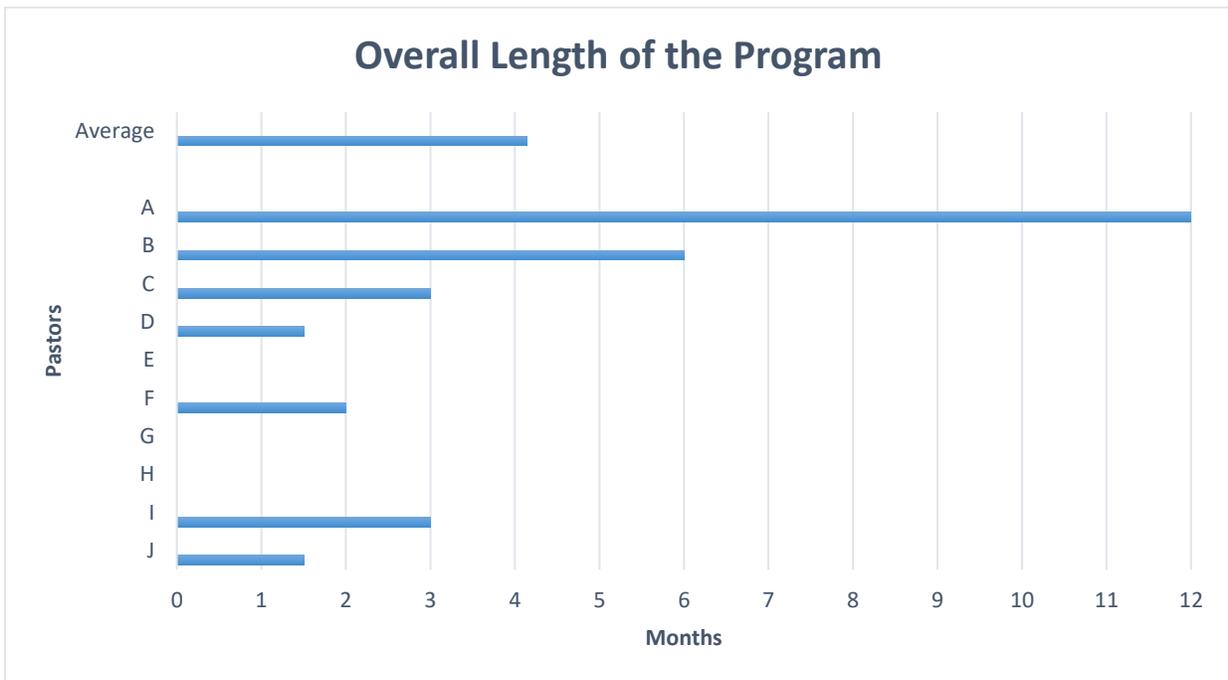


This deviation of *Pastor G* warrants calculating a trimmed mean, which removes the outliers from both ends. The outliers above would include the one-month and thirty-six-month catechisms. After eliminating these two outliers from the ends of the spectrum, the trimmed average calculates to a little over four months long, representing a total of sixteen sessions. This

is much closer to the median, which is three months long, and reflects a more accurate depiction of the mode as well. The mode is represented by both six weeks and three months. This can easily be seen in the following graph:



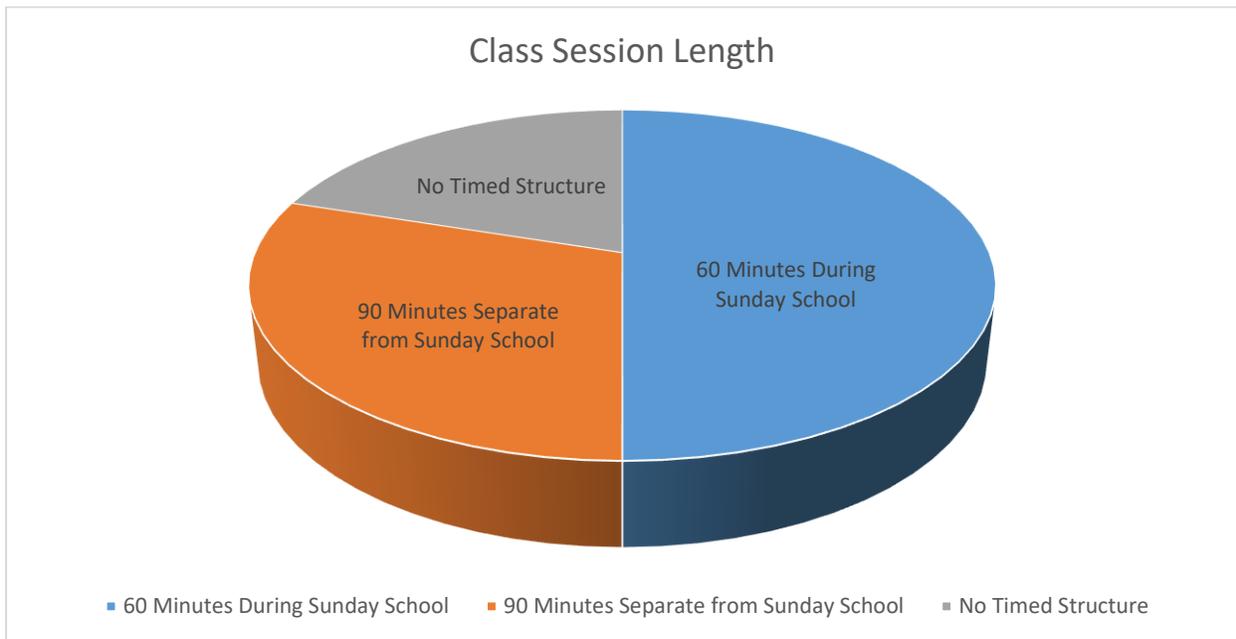
The following graph shows how the trimmed average relates to the individual lengths of each program when the outliers, *Pastor E* and *Pastor G*, are removed:



Because *Pastor H* does not structure his catechesis around traditional catechisms, he did not provide a specific length that could be used in the data or graphs above.

Five out of ten pastors interviewed choose to conduct their baptismal classes during Sunday school to help accommodate the busy schedules of the candidates. Therefore, half of the

pastors limit their sessions to sixty minutes. Three out of ten pastors said they initially offered their classes during Sunday school but found it too difficult to cover the designated amount of material within this limited timeframe. Instead, they have decided to gather after church or in the evening when they can meet for at least ninety minutes. Two pastors did not provide any set parameters designating how long their class sessions lasted. This data is reflected in the circle graph that follows:



The overall length of the Encounter Program was four months long, falling within the average timeframe shared by the interviewed pastors. The class sessions did not take place during Sunday school, but instead the group met immediately after church. The length of each teaching session ranged from sixty to ninety minutes long, also falling within the range shared by eight out of the ten pastors interviewed. When interviewing the Encounter participants, 100 percent of the participants said the overall length of the program was perfect. Though many of them thought going into the program that four months might be tediously long, they commented in the end that the time went by quickly. No participant felt that the two-hour meeting time,

which included the meal, was two long. Six out of fourteen specifically mentioned that they wished some sessions could have been longer, either to provide more time for the presenters to share or to meet with their mentor groups. Over 70 percent of the participants noted that the individual sessions went by quickly because the presentations were either captivating or diverse enough to maintain their attention due to the variety of presenters.

The amount of material covered during Encounter would have been difficult to cover within the Sunday school hour, which often is restricted to fifty minutes once everyone arrives and the class organizationally begins. The confinement of a regimented block of time can also make the presenters feel rushed, which ultimately affects their presentation. This was the primary reason why the three pastors moved their meeting times away from Sunday school. Four out of ten pastors also noted that meeting informally with the baptismal candidates over a meal helped establish a connection with them that was indispensable. This was echoed by 100 percent of the Encounter participants who either noted that they appreciated the meals or valued the time spent talking with their mentor groups during the meal.

One concern about spreading the class sessions out over an extended period is whether this might prevent some participants from being able to come to every session based on their busy schedules. The Encounter program decided to meet immediately after church because their schedules were often busier during the week and in the evenings. There were only three out of the fourteen participants who had to miss one teaching session. The reasons included a death in the family, a surgery, and a family trip out of the state. The level of commitment every participant showed was outstanding and this was largely due to the level of expectation attached to their attendance. Each participant was asked to sign a 'Covenant of Understanding,' which pledged their commitment to attend every session possible.

This paper has shown that a four-month program with up to sixteen sessions that lasts sixty to ninety minutes is an effective length for a catechesis. If possible, this time should either take place during Sunday school or over a meal to accommodate the participants' schedules and to help build relationships. How this time is filled, however, will determine the receptibility of the program's length. Meeting for sixteen sessions in a traditionally structured class where information is simply presented through readings and lectures would not necessarily be received as openly as the Encounter format. Providing a meal, time for group conversations, and incorporating a variety of teaching styles and methods all helped contribute to the openness surrounding the length of each class and the entire program. Therefore the ideal length of the program is contingent on the next two sections: Volunteerism and Experiential Learning.

Volunteerism

Traditionally, catechisms across Mennonite churches were always led by one person—the pastor. Though every single pastor interviewed said he was actively leading the catechisms, seven out of ten said they incorporate multiple volunteers into their catechesis. The roles of these volunteers include teachers, guest speakers, and mentors. Five out of ten pastors said their catechisms are led by a team of at least two teachers. Similarly, five out of the ten pastors provide time for various members of their church to come and share their testimonies with the baptismal candidates. Three out of the ten pastors utilize volunteers as mentors. Though there may be more pastors who incorporate various volunteers, the above-mentioned pastors said that integrating volunteers into their catechisms is essential to the success of their programs. A diversified group of multiple volunteers provides a fresh perspective throughout the process while also bridging opportunities for relationships to be established between the candidates and the rest of the church.

Ten out of fourteen participants noted that it was the teaching or testimonials of the presenters that helped contribute to their personal transformation. A recurring comment attached to this statistic is how the variety of presenters helped maintain a high level of energy week after week, while also offering a unique perspective and viewpoint into each week's conversation. Many said that they were able to connect personally with at least one of the presenters due to a commonality established with their testimonies. Seven out of the fourteen participants also attributed their transformation experience to the mentors or mentor groups. Overall, in addition to the participants, Encounter asked twenty-two different people to volunteer their time as a presenter, a mentor, or as a cook. When this many volunteers are willing to help, it sends a message to the participants that the church values the program and genuinely cares about those willing to participate in the program.

This project's research shows that by incorporating multiple volunteers into the catechesis, it can effectively lead to a transformational experience. Incorporating a team of volunteers takes a lot of organizational work and planning. It also requires a large pool of people who are willing to invest their time, energy, and talents for the betterment of those lives impacted by the program. Though this may be challenging, it is an essential element that can elevate a catechetical program to another level. The selection of volunteers, however, will make or break the process. Finding the right people who are gifted to best fulfill the needed roles requires a great deal of prayer and discernment ahead of time. The program's success, however, is not just determined by the number of volunteers. It is also contingent on the number of called and well-equipped volunteers willing to help the participants fully engage in the experience.

Experiential Learning

This paper has defined “Catechesis” as the religious teaching associated with the fundamental, doctrinal, and ethical content of the Christian faith in preparation for baptism. Traditional teaching in the church rarely transcends beyond a classroom setting. This is also true for most catechisms. Though spiritual growth often comes out of one’s personal experiences, churches rarely associate “teaching” with personal experiences. Religious teaching is typically comprised of information being passed on from the teacher to student via a lecture, a reading, or a discussion. Though it is possible for transformation to derive from mere information, it is the opinion of this writer that transformation is more likely to happen when information is blended with personal experiences that go beyond academics. This is called experiential learning.

Only four out of ten pastors provide an opportunity for their baptismal candidates to partake in a learning experience outside of an academic setting. Just one pastor, out of the four mentioned, provides opportunities for his candidates to participate in outside activities besides their local Mennonite Information Center. The one pastor, however, who does utilize experiential learning takes his candidates on a weekend trip and asserts that this outing, by far, is the most impactful part of his catechetical process. Since experiential learning is not an active part of most pastor’s catechisms, its effectiveness will need to rely on the data encapsulated by this single interview alongside the interviews conducted at the local level through the Encounter program. It is these interviews, however, that provide the most critical evidence that experiential learning is not only transformative but is a vital missing component in most traditional catechisms that should be strategically incorporated into the catechetical process.

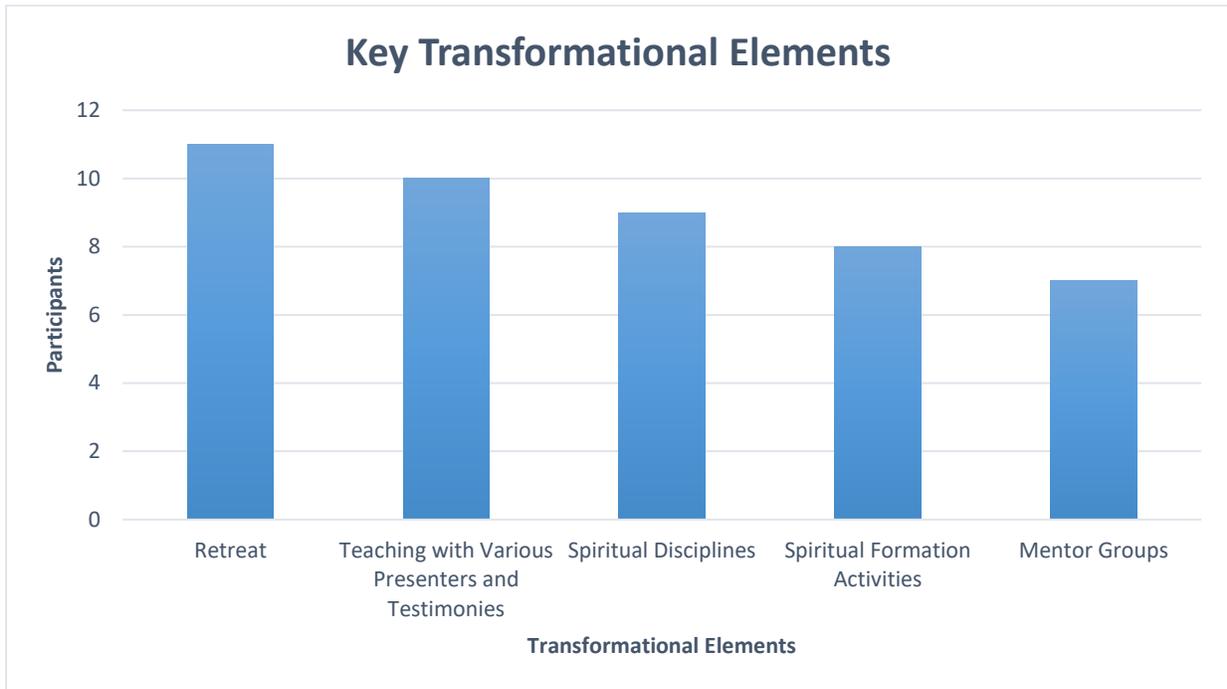
One hundred percent of those interviewed said their Encounter experience was better than their original baptismal class, which was largely confined to traditional classroom learning.

Eleven out of fourteen said they experienced a significant transformation during Encounter that led to an increased level of commitment in their faith. The other three said they were spiritually thriving going into the program so they could not testify that they were *transformed*, but all three said their Encounter experience expanded their preexisting heightened level of commitment. Though the in-class components, such as teaching, mentor groups, and testimonials were all key elements in the program, most of the participants shared it was the extracurricular elements that left the greatest impact.

Twelve out of the fourteen participants interviewed said the retreat was a critical component of the program, with eleven of them saying it was instrumental in their transformation experience. The reason why the three could not say the retreat was a *transformative* experience was because they were the three who said they did not experience a transformation during Encounter. To be clear, one hundred percent of those who said their spiritual walk with God was transformed during Encounter attributed this to the retreat. Eight of the fourteen said the spiritual formation activities that were done outside of the classroom also contributed to their transformation experience. Nine of the fourteen interviewed said their transformation could also be credited to the spiritual disciplines they adopted and exercised outside of the classroom. Four out of the fourteen said they were stretched outside of their comfort zone and this also added to their transformation. Though the group was unable to go on a cross-cultural trip due to the coronavirus pandemic, it can be presumed, based on the data, that this activity would have added to their transformation as well.

Four out of ten pastors interviewed agreed that any secondary activities done outside of the classroom supplements the catechesis experience enough to have favorable effects on a person's faith. The Encounter program showed that if these extracurricular activities have a

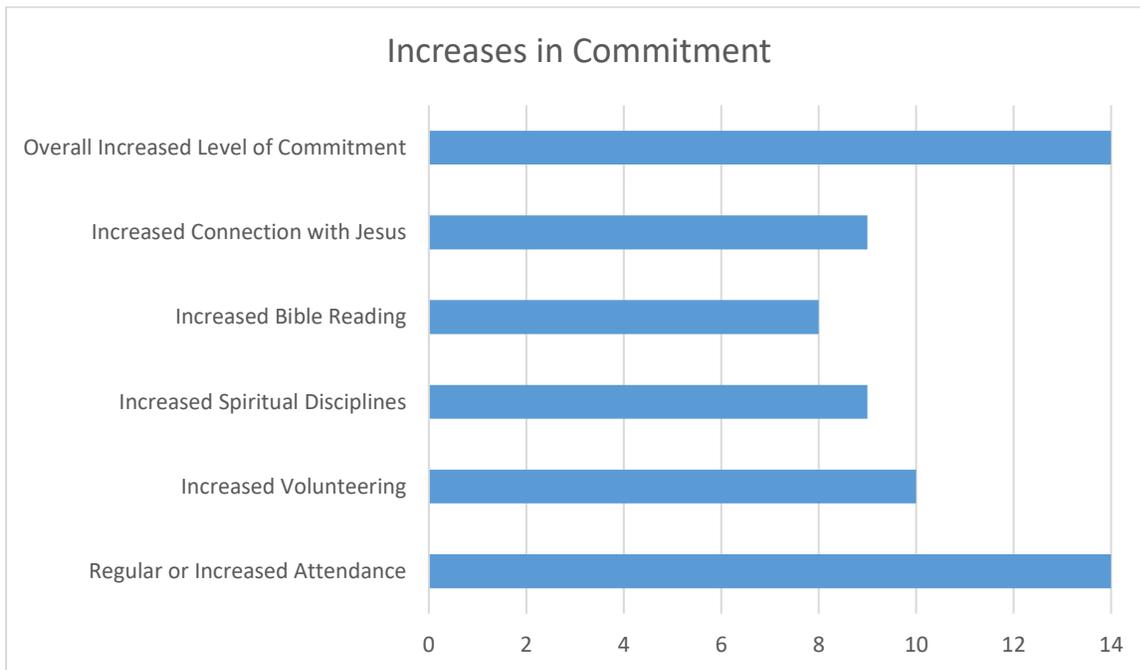
spiritual emphasis, they dramatically increase the chances that these favorable effects will be spiritually transforming. According to the interviews, the key factors that contributed to the transformation of these participants are expressed in the following graph:



Though it was very evident that the in-class activities helped contribute to their transformation, it was in conjunction with the experiential learning activities that amplified their overall experience.

This data shows that an extensive and deep catechesis does produce a transformative experience. The question remains: Did these transformative experiences lead to a greater commitment to Jesus Christ? One hundred percent of the participants interviewed said the commitment level attached to their faith had significantly improved. Ten out of fourteen expressed their transformation has led them to volunteer more at church. Nine out of fourteen claim they have experienced a spiritual awakening, and as a result, they believe their relationship with Jesus is closer. Nine out of fourteen said they were now regularly practicing at least one spiritual discipline they were not practicing before Encounter. Eight out of fourteen declared they

are now reading the Bible more than they did before Encounter. One hundred percent of those who attended church services regularly before Encounter continued to do so during and after their Encounter experience. The key, however, was in the attendance rate of those who were less consistent before Encounter. One hundred percent of these participants showed an increased level of attendance during and after Encounter. These increased levels of commitment are expressed in the following graph:



The research has shown that incorporating experiential learning into the program has led participants to a greater commitment level in their spiritual walk. This was verified when fourteen out of fourteen said they preferred Encounter over their original baptismal class experience and would recommend it to anyone wanting to be baptized. Using the broader church interviews, six out of ten pastors said they wanted to improve their catechisms by creating a program that focused more on discipleship. Though seven out of ten pastors recognize that personal transformation is often dependent on the individual's openness to the program, eight out

of ten pastors agree that it is up to the church to develop a program that increases the potential for spiritual growth.

One could argue that many of these participants were already committed and that the preexisting commitment level of the sampling group might have impacted the results. The problem with this argument is twofold. First, it does not consider the fact that a person's desire to be baptized is a step of faith that reflects some level of commitment. Therefore, it is presumed that anyone participating in a catechism class is committed to Jesus on some level. Consequently, an argument of a preexisting commitment skewing the data is inconclusive because it can be reasonably assumed that this sampling group was also committed going into their original baptismal class. Yet, one hundred percent of them believed Encounter was more effective than their original baptismal class.

Second, the level of commitment will vary in any given group of Christians. The level of commitment also varies within an individual's life based on his or her personal experiences and circumstances. Therefore, it can be presumed that the commitment level of each Encounter participant varied dramatically from one another. To argue that a certain level of preexisting commitment can skew the results ignores the fact that each person who participated was at a different place in his or her walk with Jesus. Since one hundred percent said they walked away from their Encounter experience more committed in some aspect of their spiritual life, it would be difficult to argue that the added catechetical elements did not contribute to this transformation. Perhaps the individual's level of commitment going into the program can have causative effects on the amount of transformation that takes place during the program, but this does not negate the fact that eleven out of fourteen people said they were transformed, regardless of their commitment level. The theory that their preexisting commitment automatically led to a

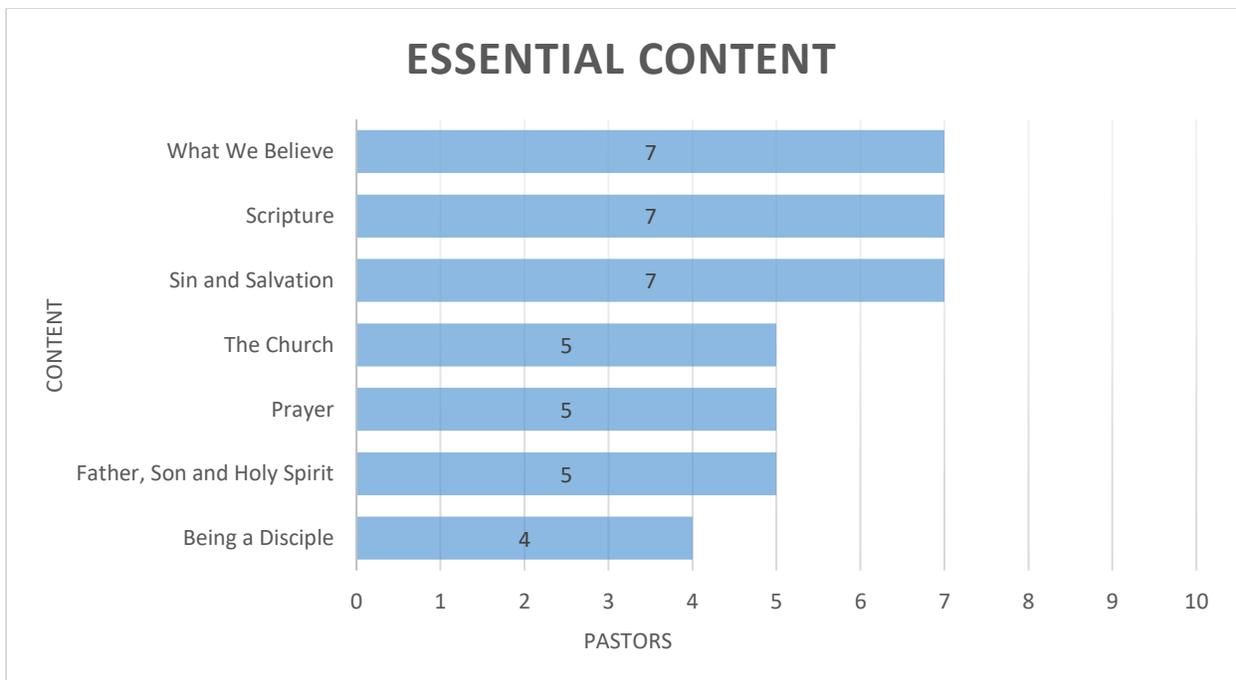
transformation is also repudiated by the three who said they were not transformed due to their heightened level of commitment before going into the program. Therefore, the research does show that an extensive and deep catechesis does lead to a higher level of commitment to Jesus Christ.

Essential Content

The research has shown that the methodology and structure of the catechetical process can be essential to the success of the program, but is there specific content or material that should also be deemed essential? This was difficult to evaluate because nine out of ten pastors create their own catechisms using a wide array of themes within their curriculum. Here are the primary topics represented in all ten catechisms: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Scripture; the Creation Story; Sin and Salvation; God's Covenants; Gifts of the Holy Spirit; Being a Christian and a Disciple; Faith Versus Works; Spiritual Disciplines; Prayer; Spiritual Warfare; the Church; Congregational Relationships; Church History; Anabaptist History; Anabaptism; Church Discipline; Baptism; Communion; Foot Washing; Kingdom Citizenship and Values; Peace and Justice; Family, Singleness, and Marriage; Stewardship; Worship; Being a Witness; Suffering; God's Will, the Gospels; Jesus's Teachings; the Lord's Prayer; the Sermon on the Mount; the Great Commission; Paul's Letters; Ministry and Leadership; Eschatology; Healing; Church Tradition; Walking with Christ; Living in Christ; Growing in Christ; Assurance; Knowledge; Holiness; Obedience; Volunteering; Equipping; and the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*.

Many of these topics are also found within the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. So when seven out of ten pastors say they take time to review this document within their baptismal classes, it signifies that most pastors believe these topics are each important. This project does not want to undermine the significance of the twenty-four articles emphasized within this

Mennonite doctrine. Yet the data in this section will primarily reflect the topics that are set apart from this document and covered on their own merit. When factoring in the variety of topics found within the ten curriculums shared by the pastors interviewed, the following topics reoccurred in at least four or more catechisms apart from the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*: (1) What We Believe (2) Scripture; (3) Sin and Salvation; (4) The Church; (5) Prayer; (6) God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and (7) Being a Disciple. These were listed in order of highest frequency and represented in the following graph:



The Encounter program was centered around the following teaching sessions: (1) Biblical Survey; (2) Biblical Study; (3) Intimacy with God; (4) Spiritual Disciplines; (5) Spiritual Warfare; (6) Spiritual Gifts; (7) Personal Calling; (8) A Life of Obedience; (9) The Purpose of Church; and (10) The Great Commission. When cross analyzing the seven topics listed in the graph above with those topics covered during the Encounter program, it is evident that most of the topics overlap with one another. The importance of Scripture is taught in sessions one and two. Sin and Salvation is thoroughly covered in session three. The significance of the church is

the sole area of focus in session nine. Prayer is a vital part of the discussion in sessions four and five. Aspects about the Holy Trinity are also covered in session three. Being a Disciple is emphasized throughout the entire Encounter program, but especially in sessions seven, eight, and ten. The one area, unfortunately, that was not covered well was “What We Believe.”

Because the Encounter program was designed to focus on Christian discipleship, it lacked theological depth and failed to cover the doctrinal insights of Anabaptism. Seven out of ten pastors, however, said the theological and historical overview of Anabaptism is essential to their baptism and membership classes. It is evident that a catechism that focuses solely on broad Christian topics without some specific theological and denominational discourse is leaving out a key piece of the discipleship process. Six out of fourteen Encounter participants echoed this sentiment when they said the program should include a teaching session on what Mennonites believe or various aspects of church history.

In addition to some theological content being added, five out of fourteen Encounter participants said that a topic on baptism should be added if this discipleship program replaces the original baptismal class. Five out of fourteen also said there should be more time allotted for the discipleship groups to meet. Finally, four out of fourteen said they valued the book *God's Story, Our Story* and wished Encounter could have produced a resource or work booklet that could be utilized during and after the program. These critiques will all be evaluated when synthesizing the data to help determine the most essential elements needed in an effective catechism program. Though the content of the Encounter program was effective, the research shows that theological and denominational teaching is still essential and should never be left out of the process.

Synthesizing the Data

Nine out of ten pastors interviewed said they would like to see the broader church provide more resources for the catechetical process. Though they may be selective in what they glean from these resources, they would welcome anything that could be intertwined with their existing catechisms. Nine out of ten also said they have developed their own catechisms primarily because they have not found anything published that encapsulates everything they want to instill in their baptismal candidates. This shows the importance of developing a catechesis utilizing the most effective elements analyzed from this research project. When evaluating the research to synthesize a transformative catechesis that leads to a greater commitment, the data shows there are five essential elements needed: (1) A culture that emphasizes the importance of baptism; (2) Adequate time to instill spiritual habits; (3) The utilization of multiple volunteers; (4) The incorporation of experiential learning; and (5) Content that encompasses both theology and discipleship.

Pastors agree that it is essential to create an environment that showcases the importance of baptism. This can be done through announcements that advertise upcoming classes, but if the congregation does not hear about the fundamental significance of baptism, they will not be motivated to personally make this commitment. This research has shown that testimonials are helpful in convicting people of the need to change and therefore should be interwoven with the baptismal ceremonies and church services as much as possible. Creating a baptismal ceremony that genuinely celebrates the vows being made is crucial in creating a culture that values this sacrament. The early church went to great lengths to prepare Christians for this sacrament. Anabaptists were willing to die for this spiritual act. Churches today could do more to glorify the act of baptism in a way that inspires others to also make this commitment. Sermons should

frequently point to the theological and biblical significance of baptism. Though this project did not focus explicitly on this aspect, it is evident that creating a culture that emphasizes the importance of baptism is an essential steppingstone to the catechetical process.

While no specific time frame of teaching will automatically cause spiritual formation, it is abundantly clear that such spiritual formation takes time. Though the research shows that the average length of a catechism is four months long, what is more important is that there is enough time to not only cover the various weekly topics, but also ample opportunity to incorporate the experiential learning that leads to spiritual formation. A 2009 study shows that it can take anywhere from 18 to 254 days to develop a habit. This same study concluded that for the average person, it takes about 66 days for a new behavior to become automatic.¹¹⁹ This study does not factor in the inner workings of the Holy Spirit and God's ability to transform people quickly; but based on the research conducted within this project, it is highly recommended that the catechetical process be at least four months long.

Offering a variety of perspectives through multiple volunteers can keep the catechetical process fresh and relevant while also building ongoing relationships that can last well beyond a person's baptism. This research has shown that there are three primary areas where volunteers can best be utilized: (1) To teach; (2) To share their testimonies; and (3) To mentor. Barna Group research also shows that the development of relationships within the church is one of the leading methods used to produce resilient, committed Christians.¹²⁰ When the catechetical process uses several volunteers, it sends a message that the program and its participants are both embraced

¹¹⁹ Phillippa Lally, Cornelia Van Jaarsveld, Henry W. Potts and Jane Wardle, "How are Habits Formed: Modeling Habit Formation in the Real World," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6 (October 2010): 1007.

¹²⁰ Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 36-37.

and valued by the church. The data in this study reflects the importance of prayerfully discerning how multiple people can be used to enhance the catechetical process.

The intervention plan confirms that experiential learning done outside of the traditional classroom setting is vital in producing transformative experiences. Integrating spiritual disciplines, spiritual formation activities, and opportunities to take a retreat or service trip can stretch a person and lead to spiritual growth. When these activities are combined with accountability over a long period of time it can lead to habits that can greatly benefit the baptismal candidates as they continue their faith journey beyond baptism. This validates Alan Kreider's contention that the patient development of a person's virtuous character over time is key to a successful catechesis.¹²¹ Not only was this the practice of the early church, but this paper shows that experiential learning is instrumental in producing Christians today who are more committed in their faith and in the church.

Finally, there are several essential topics that need to be covered within the catechism classes. Though many of these topics are theological in nature, it is important to present them in a way that can be embraced into one's lifestyle. It is not enough to merely understand who God is. We must also teach young people how to grow in their relationship with God. Yes, pointing to the inerrancy of Scripture is vital, but so is teaching the baptismal candidates how to read the Bible and incorporate it into their lives. Therefore, pastors must balance theology and discipleship when presenting the content. Ultimately pastors can continue to emphasize the content they deem essential, but this research has shown the importance of covering the following topics: What We Believe; Scripture; Sin and Salvation; the Church; Prayer; and What

¹²¹ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 155.

It Means to Be a Disciple. There must also be a clear understanding of what baptism represents and why it is important.

Overall, the intervention plan was well received and can be used as an effective model of catechesis with the addition of more theological teaching on Anabaptism and baptism. This four-month program helped usher its participants into a transformative experience that equipped and prepared them to live a more spiritually committed lifestyle. This program used multiple volunteers to help teach, share their testimonies, and mentor these new and young believers into a better understanding of how to live out the various themes found in the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. Finally, the experiential learning helped develop habits in the participants that has led to a greater commitment in their faith and their walk with Jesus. In conclusion, this project has shown that if Martins Creek couples an extensive and deep catechesis with transformative experiences, then it will better prepare its new and young believers for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

It is the responsibility of the Christian researcher to humbly consider how his or her work can make a difference in the Kingdom of God. Spiritual transformation comes from the Holy Spirit when individuals and communities open their lives to the workings of God's grace. This is not something that can be manufactured or manipulated, yet this research has shown that when the church provides genuine avenues where hearts can be opened, minds can be renewed, and souls can be moved—lives will be changed. The data shows that when church leaders utilize the giftings of multiple volunteers to supplement the essential catechetical elements with experiential learning over the course of several months, it can lead to a deeply committed faith. This should be the goal of any church: to do whatever is possible to generate a commitment in Christians that is sustainable and perpetual.

The problem this project addressed was the lack of depth and transformability in the catechetical process at Martins Creek Mennonite Church. Why focus on this one season of discipleship? Baptism is a public confession of faith that reflects a person's desire to spend the rest of his or her life in a committed relationship with Jesus. With this step of faith often comes a spiritual high that welcomes opportunities for spiritual formation. This is the perfect time to develop spiritual habits in these individuals from which they can richly benefit for the rest of their lives. Like many other churches, Martins Creek was not taking full advantage of this opportunity and unfortunately was choosing to fill its baptismal classes with shallow and superficial teaching. The church desperately needed to address this problem so that it could seize this opportune time in young people's faith journeys and equip them with tools that could enable them to spiritually flourish and grow moving forward.

The purpose of this project was to analyze and synthesize a catechesis that would produce and equip a generation of committed and resilient disciples who would thrive during a time when a lot of their peers were choosing to abandon the church. The church had a choice: to continue to passively wait for these young people to make a commitment to Jesus and hope that the current state encompassing its baptismal classes would be sufficient, or to be proactive in discipling them into a commitment that can launch them into a more sustainable faith journey. Martins Creek took action through a well-researched intervention plan, developing a program that equipped individuals to grow mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and experientially. This program helped individuals solidify their commitment to Jesus, providing them with practical tools needed to grow in their faith and effectively set the stage for a lifelong journey of sustainable discipleship.

This project started with a simple premise that more could be done to impact the faith and spiritual formation of the new and young believers of Martins Creek who wanted to be baptized. Though more has been done to improve the catechetical process, the premise remains intact. There is still more that can be done. Life-changing improvements within the church should always be perpetual. When a church settles into a place of stagnancy or complacency, it risks a slow death. Improving the catechetical process was a start. Though it was significant, it is still merely one component among many factors that can positively influence a person's faith journey.

Movement in the right direction is progress, but this momentum should provide incentive to explore other potential areas of spiritual growth. There is still more to be done. It provokes the question: Where does one go from here? To consider this, the researcher must look beyond the immediate results of the intervention plan and see the bigger picture that leads to greater

possibilities. This can be done strategically by exploring the following four questions: (1) How does this research correlate with the literature reviewed? (2) What research still needs to be done? (3) How might this research affect the broader church? (4) What can be gleaned from this research moving forward? This chapter will consider these questions as it provides a bridge that links what has been done with the possibilities of what still needs to be done.

How Does this Research Correlate with the Literature Reviewed?

In the literary research done in preparation for this project, there were four resources that strongly impacted the structural makeup of the intervention plan: (1) *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* by Alan Kreider; (2) *Grounded in the Gospel* by J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett; (3) *Faith for Exiles* by David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock; and (4) *The Essential Components Manual* by Global Disciples. Though there were some variances among the content and approach each book represented, at the heart of these writings was a methodology grounded in God's Word and backed by research or experience. While only two dealt directly with catechesis, each resource brought a refreshing outlook on discipleship to the table. Blending these four rich resources to create a discipleship program that can be used as a catechism brought integrity to the intervention plan. The research that followed the intervention plan, in return, brought validation to each of their perspectives.

At the core of this project was Kreider's historical research, which argued that the early church's success in spreading the gospel was largely due to the way these early Christians conducted their lives. Second and third century Christians beautifully reflected the teachings of Jesus Christ primarily because it was ingrained in them through a lengthy teaching process that often took up to three years and culminated with their baptisms.¹²² Though it sustained them

¹²² Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 19.

through some of the most tumultuous times in church history, the question that Kreider's research did not answer was whether this form of in-depth discipleship could work today. This was one of the key components of the intervention plan. Would it be beneficial to extend the catechetical process to provide more time for spiritual habits to develop? Though the discipleship process of the intervention plan did not last three years, the research did show that a lengthier process provided opportunities for spiritual formation to take place and spiritual habits to be formed.

An argument could be raised that four months was too short, and that today's model should follow the early church's three-year plan. The key difference between the new converts of the early church and those who participated in Encounter was the preexisting foundation of Christianity established in the Encounter participants. All the participants had spent most, if not all, of their lives growing up in the church. With this advantage, a firm foundation of Christianity was already established in many of these Encounter participants. The early church's baptismal candidates were primarily raised in either a pagan or secular environment. With this came an indoctrination of worldly habits that needed to be broken. While at the same time, the formulization of Christian values, which was foreign to many of them, also needed to be instilled in them. To argue that young believers today need three years of catechesis before they should be baptized fails to consider this significant difference between the two groups. This project has shown that even though three years may be unnecessary, a lengthy process where spiritual habits can be instilled is still important.

Packer and Parrett highlight the importance of experiential learning. They argue that traditional religious teaching should be supplemented with action steps that draw students into a closer relationship with Jesus. They believe the framework of a catechism should provide

opportunities for individuals to experience truth through learning; experience life through worship; and experience God's way through action steps.¹²³ The truth through learning uses more traditional methods of catechesis, such as teaching and preaching. The life through worship enables the candidates to draw in close to the Lord through prayer, worship, and other spiritual disciplines. Finally, the experiencing God's way takes place when the candidates engage in community, service, and outreach.¹²⁴ This blend of traditional and experiential learning provided the framework that was needed to create a catechism that focused primarily on discipleship and not just information transfer. The question that was lingering was whether or not this process would work at Martins Creek.

The research done through the intervention plan verified that not only did this model of catechesis work, but it was one of the key components that led to a transformative growth in many of the participants. When combining Kreider's research with Packer and Parrett's approach, it provided a platform where spiritual habits could be instilled through experiential learning over a lengthy period of time. This proved to be a highly effective conglomeration that deepened the catechetical process and led to a higher level of commitment. This project validated Packer and Parrett's premise that providing opportunities for individuals to put their faith into action is key in the discipleship process. It also equipped the participants with practical spiritual growth tools they can use for the rest of their lives.

The third source that strongly influenced the direction of this project came out of the most recent research done by Barna Group. In this research, Kinnaman and Matlock explore five essential elements needed to produce resilient disciples who are serious about their faith. The

¹²³ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 124.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

first element involves helping young believers experience Jesus in a way that brings them deep joy and satisfaction, where Jesus speaks into their lives and worship becomes a lifestyle. Second, they must be able to draw a direct correlation between the truths found in the Bible and the issues they face in life. Third, they must feel they belong in church and have older, adult friends who will encourage them spiritually. Fourth, they must have a strong sense of purpose and calling for their lives. Finally, Kinnaman and Matlock say resilient Christians have a desire to be used by God for mission, witness, and outreach that leads to changed lives in today's world.¹²⁵

This research done by Barna Group points to the importance of mentors speaking into the lives of new and young believers. This is not a new concept. Kreider points out that the early church's development of spiritual habits was largely influenced by the modeling done by the sponsors of the new baptismal candidates.¹²⁶ Accountability and encouragement are extremely important when a person is trying to formulate new habits. It was very evident that mentorship needed to be a vital component of the intervention plan. Beyond mentorship, Kinnaman and Matlock also provided four essential topics that needed to be woven into the teaching sessions: Scripture; Church; Calling; and Mission. Though their research showed these topics were crucial in the development of resilient disciples, it was evident that the intervention plan needed more meat behind its teaching. The discipleship program of Global Disciples filled in the final missing pieces to the intervention plan. Their program not only helped formulate more topic ideas, but it crystalized how to best present the given topics.

Global Disciples is a well-respected ministry that has helped countless church leaders around the world become better equipped at helping disciples make more disciples. Their global

¹²⁵ Kinnaman and Matlock, *Faith for Exiles*, 36-37.

¹²⁶ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 171.

influence has provided discipleship training for some of the least reached regions in the world, using a remarkably simple approach—help disciples learn how to better disciple others. One of their key methods involves soliciting numerous volunteers to do the teaching on the topics they are most passionate about. So instead of one or two teachers covering a wide array of topics, they recruit multiple volunteers to specifically share about the one or two things they passionately live out on a regular basis. Those who are passionate about prayer, speak about prayer. Individuals who are passionate about Scripture, speak about Scripture. This methodology of teaching proved to be highly effective in the intervention plan. Utilizing multiple people who are passionate about the topic they are presenting not only assured that the topic would be justifiably covered to its fullest, but it also provided a variety of perspectives and testimonials that kept each week fresh and interesting. This also provided more people to help speak into the lives of each participant, establishing more relationships, which the Barna Group research says is essential.

This project blended the input of Kreider, Packer, Parrett, Kinnaman, Matlock, and Global Disciples to create a catechesis that was in-depth and transformative. It acquired something that was theoretically plausible and made it achievable in practice. It took key aspects represented by each of these leaders and combined them into an effective catechism. Was this the perfect catechism? Could there be something better? There is always room for improvement. The Holy Spirit has used leaders in the church for centuries to carry out His plan to expand the Kingdom and the spiritual lives of individuals within the Kingdom through evolved methodology grounded in the Word. This project has used the recent work of those who have helped expand the historical work of thousands of leaders who came before them. This study has now humbly taken their work, combined it, and projected it in a new direction for the glory of God. As a result, lives have been changed. This project took ideas expressed on paper and put them into

action. Yes, there still needs to be some tweaks and adjustments, but progress stems from action—not just ideas. From here, there is still so much more to be explored that will lead to greater results.

What Research Still Needs to Be Done?

This project provided a greater understanding of how a local church can strategically enhance its catechetical process. Yet, a catechism is just one step in a lifelong discipleship process filled with a multitude of steps that can each significantly impact a person's faith journey. The hope is that this paper will spawn more research that will lead to a greater understanding of catechesis or the lasting effects of the various elements used in the intervention plan. Churches could benefit from research that would study how methods such as experiential learning affect or enhance other aspects of discipleship. Even a study on how the different traditions surrounding the ceremony of baptism can impact a person's decision to be baptized would be an interesting offshoot of this paper. This study on catechesis acts as a stone being cast into a pond of possibilities, creating a ripple effect that can potentially lead to a greater understanding of catechesis, baptism, discipleship, and religious teaching.

The greatest area of focus that needs to be investigated is the long-term effects of utilizing a catechesis like Encounter. Though the immediate impact of the Encounter program was profound, it would be beneficial to see the lasting effects this experience will have on each participant. This could effectively be accomplished by monitoring their level of commitment over a ten-year period. This would enable the church to see if there are certain aspects of the program that have more potential for longevity, regarding particular habits or commitments. In addition, research could determine if there are key factors that either help spiritual habits be retained or prevent certain spiritual disciplines from sticking long term. These are significant

aspects that need to be studied over time, a benefit this project was incapable of pursuing due to its limited time restrictions.

Alongside of this, further research could be done by seeing how this project's intervention plan would work outside the walls of Martins Creek. Would it be as effective in other Mennonite churches, urban churches, international churches, or other denominations? The participants from Martins Creek grew up in the church. How effective would this plan be for someone with absolutely no church background, who is completely new to the faith? Follow-up research could also be done to see how the cross-cultural experience, which was discarded due to the pandemic, would have added to the experience of each participant. Another question to explore is the alternative age options associated with a program like Encounter. Would it be as effective on elementary age children or older adults? Would incorporating mentorship, spiritual disciplines, and an in-depth Bible study be too robust for children's programming? How could these methods be adjusted to accommodate the immaturity of children, yet still be effective in preparing them for their catechesis later in life? These questions can generate further research that could bring a clearer understanding of how this catechesis can function within a completely different context.

This project focused on discipleship within the narrow confines of catechesis. Yet the methodology used for Encounter could possibly be effective in many other forms of discipleship. Further research could be done exploring how experiential learning, for example, could impact discipleship programs like Sunday school, small groups, mentoring, and Bible studies. In a similar manner, would a program like Encounter be beneficial for older, more seasoned Christians who are more set in their ways? New and young Christians who want to make a commitment through baptism have an appetite for learning new things because they are still

moldable and impressionable. Is this true for people who have been part of the church for years? Research should be done to see how easy or difficult it is to instill new habits in an older Christian. A study could be done to determine what methodology is the best for teaching “an old dog new tricks.” Will new habits stick with someone who has been a Christian for decades, living their whole lives without ever incorporating spiritual disciplines? When an entire church goes through a discipleship program together, the potential for churchwide revival is exponentially greater. The church would profit from a study that focuses on the benefits Encounter could have on an entire congregation.

There is no question that the intervention plan brought about the much-needed changes to the catechetical process of Martins Creek, enabling lives to be transformed. The hope is that this program will continue for years to come, creating a church filled with committed Christians. The potential benefits of this research will hopefully stretch far beyond the confines of one Mennonite congregation. It is expected that other pastors will utilize the findings in this study to further enhance their church’s catechesis or discipleship programs. Likewise, if other researchers are inspired to supplement this thesis project with further studies, it has the potential of impacting thousands of lives and ultimately bringing glory to God and expanding His Kingdom.

How Might This Research Affect the Broader Church?

The pastors interviewed for this project clearly articulated that there is a shortage of worthy material that is relevant, practical, accessible, transformative, Biblical, and still theologically sound. Publishers no longer want to produce material that only appeals to a limited demographic. This leads to writers often replacing or compromising specific denominational theology with a general watered-down depiction of doctrinal views. To further inflate the issue, printed material can easily become dated and be financially burdensome. This accentuates the

importance of finding creative ways to provide curriculums for pastors to access and use electronically. Regardless of the form, pastors need quality and effective material that can easily be incorporated within their existing catechesis or discipleship programs. The information generated by this study is helpful in stressing the importance of catechetical aspects like length, volunteerism, experiential learning, and essential content. If, however, this is not synthesized into a tool, video or booklet that can easily be accessed by pastors, this study will fall short of its ultimate potential.

It will greatly benefit any future baptismal candidates of Martins Creek and the hundreds of churches affiliated with the Evana Network and Lancaster Mennonite Conference if a curriculum is synthesized incorporating all the essential elements of this study. The general concepts discovered through this study clarify what a catechesis should look like, but this needs to be formulated into a curriculum, video, or workbook that is tangible and accessible to pastors. Whether this medium is printed or distributed electronically, it will only be useful if it is produced in an applicable form beyond this paper. The broader church would also greatly benefit from seminars or conferences that can articulate the finding of this study and provide practical tools that can be utilized by pastors in their own churches. Though the focus was on Martins Creek, the hope is that a myriad of congregations, even beyond the Mennonite realm, will embrace the methodology articulated within this paper. Catholic and Presbyterian churches have recently made some significant changes in how they do their catechisms with new and innovative publications. Many Protestant churches could benefit from this study and develop new curriculum that focuses on Believer's Baptism and how to best prepare its baptismal candidates.

What Can Be Gleaned from the Research Moving Forward?

Any success that came out of this research can be attributed to three factors: (1) The amount of preliminary work that went into the intervention plan; (2) The willingness of Martins Creek's leadership team to take the bold and necessary steps that led to change; and (3) The complete reliance on the Holy Spirit. This project embraced these three principles and as a result, it has led to a highly effective catechesis. Far too many churches jump into the next exciting fad that sweeps through bookstores, hoping that it will ignite a fire in the church that will lead to exponential growth. Just as many churches become stuck in the rut called tradition and refuse to implement any necessary changes that could launch them into a churchwide revival. Worst of all, when churches fail to prayerfully discern where God is leading them, they risk functioning within the capacity of their own strength and knowledge, which will ultimately fall short. The success of any ministry needs to steer clear of these pitfalls and patiently and prayerfully do the research needed, and in time, boldly go where God leads.

Months of intense research went into the preliminary steps leading up to the intervention plan. Before anything was even presented to the leadership team of Martins Creek, this researcher read dozens of books and articles, alongside an in-depth study of Scripture. The problem Martins Creek was facing was analyzed and studied so that it was clear what needed to be done to address the problem. This researcher created spreadsheets and diagrams using a multitude of resources that pointed to a variety of possibilities on how to resolve the problem. This entire endeavor is a reminder that some of the greatest accomplishments in the church come out of a long and patient process. It is also a reminder that some of the greatest ideas are not completely original. They often come on the backs of many historical figures who also put forth this same kind of grueling effort. Pastors often rush into a new ministry without much

preliminary work or research. This is lazy and often leads to avoidable mistakes that can unfortunately derail the success of a ministry.

On the other end of the spectrum, a church can talk for years about starting something new without ever breaking ground. Too much talk without action will get a church nowhere. Change never comes easy, especially in churches that are steeped in tradition. The longer a church goes without any significant changes, the harder it can be to implement even the smallest changes. Of course, a church should not change just for the sake of change. As just mentioned, rushing into changes without proper research and discernment can be risky. Yet, fear attached to change can be the foothold the enemy uses to prevent a church from following God's leading. After much prayer and discernment, church leaders need to boldly move into action and be willing to implement the necessary changes that can lead to spiritual fruit.

Finally, research that is not covered in prayer leaves out the most vital piece of any ministry—God. Too many researchers get swept up in their own work and, unfortunately, lose sight of what God is doing. Yes, there are strategies, methodologies, and elements that are deemed effective and essential, but they are nothing without the involvement of the Holy Spirit. Church leaders often develop a ministry based on their own understanding and in the end ask God to bless it. They have this backwards. They need to seek God's guidance and pray for an understanding of God will and then develop a ministry accordingly.

After much prayer and research, Martins Creek developed an intervention plan that provided a solution to its problem. Out of these bold changes, a highly effective catechesis was developed that led to a greater commitment in its participants. This project reached its potential because it took the time to do the research, took bold steps, and was continually covered in prayer. If just one of these aspects was left out, it would have fallen short. It is a reminder that

this process is essential for any new ministry to come to fruition and reach its God-given potential.

Understanding this, after much prayer and discernment, Martins Creek has decided to launch a discipleship program like Encounter for people of all ages in the church. As important as this experience was for many of its young people, the church recognizes the potential of walking even the most seasoned Christians through a transformative experience like Encounter. The pews of Martins Creek are filled with individuals who would benefit from practical teaching and experiential learning that leads to spiritual formation. This project could conceivably transform hundreds of lives, leading to a necessary renewal and awakening at Martins Creek.

Beyond Martins Creek, there is the rippling potential that this project may shape and influence how baptismal classes and discipleship programs will be conducted throughout the Lancaster Mennonite Conference and the Evana Network. This can only come on the heels of a curriculum that can easily be accessed and utilized by church leaders across the Mennonite church. If the broader church uses it, it could provide a catalyst for equipping a highly committed generation of Mennonites that could shape the Mennonite church's future and provide much-needed leadership moving forward. This may all be hyperbole, but at its minimal capacity, this thesis project did help make a few members become more committed and with God's help it will continue to shape the lives of more to come.

Trends change with time, yet when the church takes opportunities to evaluate and analyze what is and what is not working, it can lead to necessary changes that can positively affect the church and expand the Kingdom of God. The old model of catechesis was obviously not working at Martins Creek. This project helped shed some light on what aspects of the old process needed to be eliminated and what features desperately needed to be implemented. It was a catalyst that

has led to the synthesis of a new catechesis at Martins Creek that will continue to be tweaked and adjusted down the road, leading to a deeper and more transformative experience for everyone who wants to make a commitment of faith marked by baptism. The research behind this project showed that when Martins Creek couples an extensive and deep catechesis with transformative experiences, it provides a platform where its new and young believers can be ushered into a more committed relationship with Jesus Christ.

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APPENDIX A

Encounter 2020 Participant Consent

Title of the Project: Catechesis: Returning to a Deeper Teaching that Produces Transformed Disciples for Christ

Principal Investigator: Jeremy “Jay” Conn, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be at least 18, have already participated in a baptismal class and the Encounter 2020 class at Martins Creek Mennonite Church. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to compare the Encounter 2020 class with your original baptismal class to determine which is more effective in helping a person become better prepared for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. Through this process, the participants will evaluate the different elements of each class to help decide what makes up a more effective baptismal class.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an online interview by Skype or Zoom where you will answer 10 questions about the Encounter 2020 class and your original baptismal class. The interview will take approximately 15 to 30 minutes and be audio recorded for transcription purposes.
2. Participate in a focus group of at least 10 people online using Skype or Zoom where you will be asked the same questions. This will take approximately one hour and will also be audio recorded.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Your input may help shape the future baptism and Encounter classes at Martins Creek and possibly other baptismal classes throughout the Mennonite Church and beyond. This study has the potential of transforming many lives.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of either code names or general statements that include “An Encounter participant said...”.
- Interviews will be conducted online using Skype or Zoom.
- Any responses will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. Anything written on paper will immediately be transferred to the computer and the paper documents will be shredded. All research data stored on the computer will be deleted after three years.
- All interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as Pastor at Martins Creek Mennonite Church. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from the focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jeremy “Jay” Conn. You may ask him any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or email him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Reginald Weems, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED].

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above. Please sign below and return by email ([REDACTED]) or by mail ([REDACTED]) prior to the scheduled online interview.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX B

Pastor Consent

Title of the Project: Catechesis: Returning to a Deeper Teaching that Produces Transformed Disciples for Christ

Principal Investigator: Jeremy “Jay” Conn, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 and either a pastor in Lancaster Mennonite Conference or the Evana Network who has led multiple baptismal classes. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to determine which elements of a baptismal class are most effective in helping a person become better prepared for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. Through this process, the participants will provide helpful information that can show whether there is a direct correlation between the discipleship process leading up to a person’s baptism and his or her commitment thereafter.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in an online interview by Skype or Zoom where you will answer various questions about the baptismal classes you’ve led. These questions will include information regarding class content, activities, length, resources, and procedure. The online interview will take approximately one hour and will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Your input will be used alongside the input of other pastors to draw a conclusion on how the church can best equip young and new believers for a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. This study has the potential of transforming how pastors can most effectively shape their baptismal classes to be more impactful and transformative.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of either code names or general statements that include “One pastor said...”.
- Interviews will be conducted online by Skype or Zoom.
- Any responses will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. Anything written on paper will immediately be transferred to the computer and the paper documents will be shredded. All research data stored on the computer will be deleted after three years.
- All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jeremy “Jay” Conn. You may ask him any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or email him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Reginald Weems, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED].

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above. Please sign below and return by email ([REDACTED]) or by mail ([REDACTED]) prior to the scheduled online interview.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 30, 2020

Jeremy Conn
Reginald Weems

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-83 Catechesis: Returning to a Deeper Teaching that Produces Transformed Disciples for Christ

Dear Jeremy Conn, Reginald Weems:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent forms can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. These forms should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent documents should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any

modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX D

Session 1

Biblical Survey

Main Concept

The session on Biblical Survey provides a bird's eye-view of the entire Bible so each participant can have a general understanding of what the Bible is about and how it ultimately points to the salvation story of Jesus.

Key Scripture Verses

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hebrews 4:12-13

Teaching Summary

The teacher should discuss how the Bible is arranged, highlighting aspects like the Old and New Testaments; Historical, Wisdom and Prophetic Books; and Narratives and Letters. Talk about the importance of Study Bibles and how they can bring insight through their introductions, notes, and commentary. Take time to look at various examples and show how to use the tools of each Study Bible. Emphasize the significance of placing a scripture verse in the context of its passage, book, and biblical storyline, allowing the original context to help lead to contemporary interpretations. Finally, show how all scripture points to Jesus using passages like Hebrews 9 as an example of how every aspect of God's story leads to His redemptive conclusion in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Encourage them to read through the entire Bible or at least to familiarize themselves with the Bible through videos like *The Bible Project*: <https://bibleproject.com> or https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVfwlh9XpX2Y_tQfjeln9QA

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to have something written by people, but also consider it God-breathed?
2. We say the Bible is inerrant, which means it is without error. How do we know the Bible is true? What do we do when it feels like there might be contradictions?
3. What translation of the Bible should we use?

Spiritual Formation Activity

Have them choose one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) and read the whole book. As they read, they should reflect on the following and write responses in their journal:

1. At the end of each chapter, write a summary sentence that depicts the main idea(s).
2. Overall, write down something you did not know—something that surprised you.
3. Write down anything that you do not understand.
4. What *moved* you as you read—brought you to tears or chills.
5. Who did you read about? List them and jot down something about them. What can you learn from them?
6. Consider what Jesus does and says. Write down some of His words and actions that stand out to you. What do you learn about God through dwelling on His words and actions?
7. Pick one Scripture or passage you want to explore in detail because it jumped out at you.

Session 2

Biblical Study

Main Concept

The Biblical Study session provides practical tools that can be used to study Scripture in a way that not only brings it to life, but also personalizes it for the reader.

Key Scripture Verses

1 John 1:1-4

Matthew 4:4

2 Timothy 3:14-17

Teaching Summary

When the Bible is merely read as a source of information, it leaves little room for the Holy Spirit to use the Word of God to convict, inspire or change a person. It is essential to incorporate time into our regular schedule to take a more microscopic look at what the Bible says, then personalize it. Though the Bible was written thousands of years ago, it is just as relevant today as it was when it was first written. The Bible has the power to help a person overcome evil. It has the insight to guide and instruct a person on how to live while also determining what is right and wrong. It can inspire a person into action and equip a person to live within the will of God. It can move a person emotionally while also bring healing to deep wounds. It can transform lives and renew a person's faith. The Bible ushers a person into the presence of God so he or she can better understand who God is and what His promises are for humanity. So what is the best way to read the Bible as a means for inspiration that can lead a person to think, feel, change or act—where the words on the page will come to life? There is no single method that will work for everyone. The key is to explore different ways of studying the Bible to find the method that best fits you. Take time to review some of the following methods: Nail the News Report; Summary Statement; Pinpoint Phrases and Key Words; Inductive Bible Study; Pause and Pray; Pick a Book; Pick a Topic; Find the Context and Fill In Your Name; Personalize His Promises; Dig in Deep; and Read and Reread. Feel free to share what has personally worked for you and then leave time to let them share what has worked for them.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do we start? How do we know what to read?
2. How do we personalize what we read? How can the Bible transform our lives?
3. What does it mean when people say the Bible is “living” or has “power” or “authority”?

Spiritual Formation Activity

1. Have them choose one passage in their gospel reading that stood out to them.
2. For the next two weeks they need to take at least 30 minutes every day to study this passage using a different method discussed during the teaching session. Have them repeat some of the methods that work best for them.
3. Have them write down in their journal anything that comes to mind while studying the passage and be prepared to share these things with their mentors when they meet again.

Session 3

Intimacy with God

Main Concept

The class session on Intimacy with God focuses on what it means to consider Jesus as Lord and still have an intimate relationship with Him.

Key Scripture Verses

Genesis 1:26-27

Genesis 3:8

Teaching Summary

As the Word of God is read and studied, there is no denying that God's desire for right relationships is a theme that is expressed from the very beginning in Genesis through the very last book of Revelation. It is clear that the Lord loves His children dearly. While He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, He pursues an intimate, personal relationship with each and every person. Take time to walk through Scripture, highlighting some key stories that show the extent He has taken to maintain a relationship with humanity through all the sinfulness and brokenness. This is a great opportunity to focus on how sin drives a wedge between humanity and God, yet God never gives up on humankind. The Old Testament reflects the unending ways God makes it possible for His children to come to Him, for His children to experience His presence and be in a relationship with Him. From there, you can find in the New Testament how God sent His Son, Jesus to walk the earth with His children. Now that gets personal! Jesus came to be the ultimate sacrifice so that we can be ushered back into the "garden" to live with Him in perfection. He came to reveal the Kingdom of God to the world! As His time on earth ended, God did not leave us hanging. **Read John 14** to experience a deep, personal, compassionate conversation Jesus has with His disciples, assuring them that when He leaves, the Holy Spirit will be with them. He also shared the good news that He would come back and get them (and us) and bring them back with Him, to the place He is preparing. From the beginning, God's plan was to be with us. From the beginning, He has made a way for His children, as broken and sin filled as we are, to be forgiven and dwell with Him.

Discussion Questions

1. What prevents us from having a healthy relationship in general? What about our relationship with God?
2. What does it mean to confess our sins and turn them over to God?
3. What does it mean to be forgiven by God?
4. As we receive God's grace, how can we work at extending grace to others?

Spiritual Formation Activity

1. Have them make a list of things that are preventing them from drawing in closer to God. This list should be written on a piece of paper that can be later discarded.
2. Have them take the next two weeks to pray over that list, seeking God's input on how to be released of these things.
3. They should also look up scripture that speaks into these things.

Session 4

Spiritual Disciplines

Main Concept

The session on Spiritual Disciplines provides a thorough overview of the many ways people can deepen their spiritual walk and relationship with God.

Key Scripture Verses

Romans 12:1-2

1 Timothy 4:7-8

Philippians 4:8

Teaching Summary

Spiritual Disciplines are habits, practices and experiences that will help a person grow spiritually and relationally with God. Just as athletes need to work out and develop regimented disciplines to help their muscles grow, Christians need to also develop regimented disciplines that can help them spiritually grow. This cannot be achieved overnight, but instead takes time. This is especially true if we are also trying to eliminate negative habits at the same time. There are many spiritual disciplines that help Christians connect with God, as well as grow them closer in their relationship with Him. Having said that, not all Christians are required to practice each and every one of them. Just as there are physical distinctions and differences in people, there are also a variety of ways people can relate with God. Not everyone connects the same. Encourage the class to examine the list of spiritual disciplines and prayerfully consider which ones might draw them in deeper. Take time to look at Richard Foster's book *Celebration of Discipline: A Path to Spiritual Growth* for details of what these disciplines involve. Also be sure to give practical ways to live these out. Some examples include meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, service, confession, submission, worship guidance, celebration, journaling, and music. Also take time to distinguish the difference between meaningful time and burdensome work. Partaking in spiritual disciplines should not simply be a checkoff list of activities one *has* to do. Another key aspect of this is accountability. Setting goals and having someone hold us to those goals can help keep us motivated until it becomes more habitual.

Discussion Questions

Instead of asking them questions this time, the teacher needs to leave room for them to ask questions about the different disciplines.

Spiritual Formation Activity

While at the retreat, have them spend some time alone with God. During this time they should ask God to reveal 3 disciplines they should try for the next 2 months. When they have a sense of what God is asking them to try, have them write them down and tell their mentors. The goal is to try all 3 daily (if applicable) for the next 2 months. Their mentors will check in on them occasionally to monitor how things are going. Remind them to be honest with their mentors.

Session 5

Spiritual Warfare

Main Concept

The session on Spiritual Warfare provides insight into the spiritual realm with a strong emphasis on the power of prayer.

Key Scripture Verses

Ephesians 6:10-18

1 Peter 5:6-11

Teaching Summary

Being a Christian does not mean our lives will be easy. In fact, as we commit to living for God, the enemy gets nervous and works hard to distract us and sway us away from our Father. However, one reward Christians are given is that God has our back. He will never leave us or forsake us. He is there for us and provides all we need to fight the battle. The link that connects us with God and His provisions is prayer. Time after time throughout scripture, God draws us in, inviting us to call out to Him, to ask, to seek, to petition, and to pray. It delights Him when we share about our day, ask for His advice, tell Him our woes and fears. We can also learn so much by observing Jesus and His prayer life. He was known to retreat and spend time with His Father. Prayer is vital and powerful! Some examples of prayers that can be reviewed are ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication); the Lord's Prayer Model; Breath Prayers; Intercessory Prayer; 2 Way Conversations; and Ask and Receive.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the costs of discipleship? What are the rewards of being a disciple?
2. What are the things that are preventing you from being all in?
3. How is there power through prayer?
4. Why does it sometimes feel like prayer does not work?
5. Is there something wrong with you if your prayers are not answered in the way you hoped?

Spiritual Formation Activity

While at the retreat each person should take their Bible and journal and spend at least 60 minutes alone on a prayer walk. While on the walk ask the following questions:

1. What does God want to tell you?
2. What do you want to tell God?
3. What Scripture does God want to share with you?

Encourage them to take time to be very observant to their surroundings and see and listen to what God is saying through these observations. After an hour, when they all return, have them bring the lists they created of things that are preventing them from drawing closer to the Lord. When they gather, let them release the things on this list by throwing the paper into a bonfire. Once everyone has had a chance to burn their lists, take time to pray a prayer of anointing over them. Make the prayers personal, then close each person's prayer by placing anointing oil on their foreheads in the shape of a cross. Afterwards, takes some time for each person to share anything God revealed to them.

Session 6

Personal Calling

Main Concept

The Personal Calling session focuses on how God can use people within the vocation they are being called toward and how to listen for the voice of God and know it is truly Him.

Key Scripture Verses

John 10:25-30

1 Corinthians 7:17

Teaching Summary

There is a misunderstanding that to be called by God is to be called to do pastoral or missional ministry. God's callings can lead to these positions, but it can also lead to doing His work within the context or occupation we have been equipped to fulfill. Paul was called to continue his work as a tentmaker while he was also evangelizing. It is important to learn how to listen to God's voice within the context we are placed in. This might include discipling someone at work or reflecting Christ to the customers that come in. Sometimes a calling can be ongoing, but at times it might come in the form of a single act. God often nudges people to do something like drop off groceries for a family or anonymously give someone money. Knowing our spiritual gifts can help us understand how God may use us, but more important, knowing His voice will bring clarity when the nudging comes from God. Take time to explain how we hear God. When discerning whether something is from God remember God will not ask us to do something that is outside of the parameters set by Scripture. In other words, He will not ask us to do something unethical or that might advance the enemy's schemes. We learn how God speaks to us through experience and after a while we become familiar with God's voice. Sometimes it may be through a relentless and nagging thought, butterflies in the stomach, a word from a friend, a scripture that speaks straight to our soul, or even a song.

Discussion Questions

1. How does someone hear from God? How do you know if it is God or just your imagination?
2. How do you figure out *specific* things you are supposed to do?
3. How does what you do vocationally tie into a calling? How does your personal calling relate to your spiritual gifts? What is God's plan for your life?

Spiritual Formation Activity

Have them spend some time at the retreat making a timeline of their lives. On this timeline they should write down any key moment in their lives where that moment shaped their direction or shaped who they were as a person (good or bad). They can also add key people in their lives who also helped shape them. They should then take some time to prayerfully discern how God was a part of those moments. Then have them trajectoryally consider where they may be heading. With all this in mind, walk them through a prayer where they imagine themselves alone in a setting of their choice. At some point Jesus approaches them and sits with them. Ask them to consider what Jesus wants to tell them. Then close it out by having them write down in their journal anything they were sensing. If they are comfortable, have them share these things with their mentors.

Session 7

Spiritual Gifts

Main Concept

The session on Spiritual Gifts explores the practical ways believers can use the various gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit.

Key Scripture Verses

Romans 12:6-8

1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28

Ephesians 4:11

Teaching Summary

When we choose to follow Jesus and we invite Him into our lives to reign, He fills us with His Holy Spirit. With the presence of the Holy Spirit comes spiritual gifts. These gifts are more than talents. They are God's way of equipping His people to do His work. They are distributed however the Holy Spirit deems best and together the church uses them to bring God glory. Paul's lists are not exhaustive, meaning they do not represent the only gifts available to believers. We should not look at the lists found in 1 Corinthians 12, for example, and get frustrated because we do not feel like we belong anywhere within that list. Paul is making a point that we each have gifts that need to be used, and that the source is the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to just know what our gifts are, we must know how best to utilize them and then take steps to use them. It is a waste when we refuse to use the Spiritual gifts given to us. It is also a waste when we use these Spiritual gifts for selfish ambition. Spiritual gifts used for the glory of God provides purpose and fulfillment. So what are some of these gifts? Take time to describe each of these gifts in a practical and relatable way: Apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher, music, exhortation, wisdom, knowledge, serving, helps, leadership, administration, giving, mercy, discernment, faith, hospitality, craftsmanship, intercession, healing, and missionary.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you see these gifts practically being used in positions or ministries at the church?
2. Who comes to mind in the church when you think of these gifts?
3. Are there certain gifts you feel are not being used in the church? How could they be used more?
4. Do you know what your gifts are? How are you using your gifts in the church or community?

Spiritual Formation Activity

Provide some time where they can take a spiritual gifts inventory. (There are many online that can be printed out). Have them write down the top five gifts revealed through this inventory. Also have them acknowledge what gifts are on the bottom of their lists. Then have them meet with their mentor groups and without revealing their gifts, have them each take the time to share what gifts they see in one another. Are any of the gifts on the list affirmed? They should take time to write the gifts that stand out in their journal. Close the session by spending some time in prayer asking the Lord to affirm these gifts in them. While at home they should make a list in their journal of ways they can use these gifts in the church or community.

Session 8

A Life of Obedience

Main Concept

The session on A Life of Obedience focuses on what it means to be obedient and live a life that reflects Christ and His teachings.

Key Scripture Verses

Galatians 5:22-23

Colossians 3:1-17

Teaching Summary

Though God does call us to specific things unique to each person, He also calls all His people to obedience. As Christians we are called to be a witness, and the greatest way we can be a witness to others is to reflect Christ in how we live our lives. The Bible is full of laws and teachings that reflect God's will. The difficult part is understanding what still applies to Christians today. Paul wrestled with this when evangelizing the Gentiles, implying that there were some Jewish laws that were not necessary to obey in order to be Christian. Take time by differentiating between the laws that were considered moral law and those that were cultural. When interpreting Scripture it must include an understanding of the context and what it meant to the original audience. This will help us better understand how it applies to us today. Also, observing whether a law or teaching is stressed throughout Scripture will help one understand if it was simply addressing a specific situation within a specific context or if it was something that transcends time and culture. Ultimately, the lens by which we look at all scripture should always be the teachings of Jesus. We are called to obey the teachings of Jesus and equipped to do so through the workings of the Holy Spirit. What comes out of this obedience is the Fruit of the Spirit. Aspects of morality, generosity, compassion, love, integrity, and faithfulness should be shared alongside the Fruit of the Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. How can you be more obedient and faithful? Is it a matter of working harder or letting Christ in more?
2. How do you work on obedience without it turning into legalism where you make a list of things you can or cannot do?
3. What exactly are you supposed to obey in the Bible, especially when it comes to the law in the Old Testament? Why are there some things you must obey, but other things you say are no longer relevant?

Spiritual Formation Activity

Have them write down in their journal what each fruit, found in Galatians 5, personally means to them. Next, have them consider what fruit is missing or slacking in their lives. While at home have them make some short-term goals and long-term goals of changes that might lead to producing more fruit.

Session 9

The Purpose of the Church

Main Concept

The session on the Purpose of the Church focuses on the importance of coming together as a body of believers and using one's spiritual gifts to be actively involved.

Key Scripture Verses

Acts 2:42-47

Hebrews 10:24-25

Teaching Summary

Being a part of something greater than ourselves is essential to spiritual growth. The church can provide inspiration, encouragement, accountability, insight, companionship, fellowship, structure, guidance, theology, and an avenue to put our faith into action. Scripture refers to the church as the Bride of Christ which means it plays a significant role in the plan of God's redemptive story. To not place value or significance in the church is to ignore the relationship God has with the church. Understand that the church is filled with fallen people, so it will never be perfect. With this imperfection often comes a brokenness that manifests in schisms, feuds, and wounds. Yet Jesus loves the church and is committed to the church and so should we. Church is more than attending Sunday Mornings. The teacher should dwell on the importance of building relationships and being a part of a support community. To get the most out of church a person needs to pour themselves into church. This means getting more involved in people's lives and getting more involved in the life of the church. Again, this is where it is important to understand what a person's gifts are. If a person is too invested in things that they are not passionate about it can lead to burnout. But when a person allows his or her gifts to be used in the context of church it can lead to spiritual growth and help the church function as the Body of Christ. We refer to the church as the Body of Christ because it should reflect the hands and feet of Christ within its community. This can only be done, however, if each person does their part.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits of letting people into your life and getting more involved with the lives of others?
2. How do you make church more of a priority?
3. How can you get past simply attending church and being more involved with church?
4. Why is it important to get involved? What happens if you don't?
5. What happens when you do too much and volunteer for things you are not passionate about?

Spiritual Formation Activity

Provide an opportunity for them to make 2 lists. First, have them make a list of ways they are currently involved at church. Then have them make a list of ways they could get more involved. Have them take these lists home to pray over and add to them. When they return, they will share these lists with their mentors for accountability.

Session 10

A Confession of Faith

Note: This session was not included in the intervention plan but was added later based on the results of the study.

Main Concept

The session on A Confession of Faith focuses on the doctrinal views of the Mennonite Church as found in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

Key Scripture Verses

1 Peter 3:15

Colossians 1:28

Teaching Summary

The Mennonite Church observes twenty-four articles found in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. This session should review those articles while noting how they compare with the beliefs of other denominational doctrines. For example, the first ten articles are perspectives all Christians should hold true. The next fourteen articles are what differentiates Protestants and Catholics, as well as Mennonites from other Protestants. The articles include: God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, Scripture, Creation and Divine Providence, Creation and Calling of Human Beings, Sin, Salvation, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church in Mission, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Foot Washing, Discipline in the Church, Ministry and Leadership, Church Order and Unity, Discipleship and the Christian Life, Christian Spirituality, Marriage, singleness and Family, Truth, Christian Stewardship, Peace and Justice, the Church's Relation to Government and Society, and the Reign of God. Though it is possible to become a member or be baptized into a church that we may not theologically be on the same page with, this can create long-term issues when the teaching does not always line up with our convictions. If there are theological beliefs represented here that the class is uncertain of, take the time to explore why these beliefs are represented and the scripture references used to derive these beliefs. Stress to the class that they need to be open minded to the possibility that they may have based their beliefs more on a system of tradition or contemporary thought versus a system of scriptures. It is important to firmly know what we believe so that we do not blow with the wind when certain beliefs are challenged by society or culture.

Discussion Questions

1. Which articles are you most passionate about?
2. Which articles are you struggling with?
3. What does it mean to be Mennonite? Why is it important to be a part of a denomination?
4. What could happen if you do not solidify the things you believe?

Spiritual Formation Activity

Have them take home the brochure that lists the 24 articles and review them. If they are not members or have not been baptized, have them prayerfully consider whether they are ready for this step. Journal about it. When they return, they should share what they wrote with their mentors.

Session 11

The Great Commission

Main Concept

The session on the Great Commission focuses on what it means to be a disciple who makes disciples and the importance of evangelism, outreach, service, and missions.

Key Scripture Verses

Matthew 28:16-20

Acts 1:8

Teaching Summary

Jesus makes it clear that as disciples we are commissioned to make more disciples by teaching them and walking with them, just as Jesus did His disciples. This is a commitment that transcends just sharing the Good News. It also involves being a part of the Good News by allowing our lives to exemplify what it means to be followers of Christ. It is easy for Christians to live in a bubble, where we become comfortable. Yet great spiritual growth can come as we choose to step out of our comfort zone and be actively involved in this Great Commission. This may involve walking with others who are still maturing in their faith or involve walking with those who have not yet embraced Jesus as their Lord. Regardless, it is a long-term commitment that can lead to transformation over a period of time. Sometimes individuals are called to be a part of a team that together fulfills the Great Commission. This could be done locally by volunteering in the community or through the church's mission agency where short- or long-term mission trips are taken. Finding avenues to live out the Great Commission is vital to the expansion of the Kingdom of God, but also to our own growth as Christians.

Discussion Questions

1. How can you build relationships with non-Christians? How can you make sure you are impacting them more than they are impacting you?
2. What is the best way to evangelize to others?
3. What can be done to help people step out of their comfort zone to focus more on others?
4. How can you impact the community you live in?
5. What is God leading you to consider doing? What would prevent you from doing it?

Spiritual Formation Activity

The pastor should check with the church's mission agency to consider options for a cross-cultural experience. This experience can be as extensive as an overseas missions' trip or can simply involve a week or weekend with an inner-city ministry. There are many ministries that work with refugees or the homeless that can really stretch a person. At the bare minimum, individuals should investigate local options that involve at least one week of volunteering.