

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Foreword [To the Leader]

This 22 week course of instruction in basic Christianity is intended for those adults who are preparing for baptism and/or confirmation, for those who wish to refresh or deepen their own understanding of the basics of Christian faith and practice, and for those who are curious about Christianity. No commitment is involved in attending the class.

It is based on the series of 31 classes developed by the Rev. Homer F. Rogers during a ministry of over 35 years, first at St. Barnabas, Denton, and then at St. Francis, Dallas. What I have done, primarily, is to condense them. Although I have made some changes and additions, to a great extent these are Father Rogers' ("Padre's") instructions.

During my own ministry of 49 years, I have discovered a way of using them as a powerful tool of evangelism as well as a means of deepening the understanding and commitment of the faithful.

First of all, it is important always to have the classes in a private home. The hosts as well as the priest invite friends and acquaintances to attend the classes *with no strings attached*.

Non-Episcopalians are much more likely to go to the home of a friend than they are to go to a strange church building. Furthermore, the informal setting is more conducive to the discussion which gives the course much of its power.

At the first session I hand out a list of the of the eighteen subjects to be covered over twenty-two weeks, an abbreviated form of this foreword entitled "Preface," and a list of books for outside reading by those who desire it. Then I summarize how we will proceed each week [as follows].

The class begins with the lecture, which some have compared to a cursillo *rollo*. But, unlike a rollo, the lecture is seldom dull, in good part because of the marvelous stories and examples Father Rogers uses to illustrate and clarify the theology.

These texts are, in fact, scripts which can, if necessary be used verbatim. However, the freer the lecturer is to establish eye contact, of course, the better.

The lecture is recorded on a cassette, usually a C-90 but sometimes a C-120. Copies of the tapes are made available to those who miss the class as well as to those who want to be able to re-hear the lectures. Also it is common for people who come to the classes to lend tapes to their friends. I have a high speed duplicator and I buy blank cassettes in lots of a hundred so the price is very cheap. I either lend the tapes or sell them for \$1.00 each.

When the first side of the C-90 cassette is done and the recorder stops, there is about a fifteen minute intermission with light refreshments served by the hosts. Usually other members of the class volunteer to help supply the cookies, etc., for subsequent weeks.

Following the intermission, the lecture resumes and usually takes fifteen to thirty minutes to finish. At the conclusion, xerox copies of the text of the evening's lecture are handed out. The tape recorder continues running. There may be some in the class who are "visual learners" and prefer to have the text in front of them. They can receive their copies at the beginning.

The lecturer then asks each person, in turn, to mention at least one point in the lecture to which he had any kind of reaction—positive or negative. The points are listed on a dry erase white board or a newsprint tablet on. Then the group is asked to say anything they wish about any of the points. The most desirable form of the discussion has the people speaking to each other about the points, etc., rather than to the lecturer.

The result of the discussion is that the members of the class internalize the material *and* they develop a sense of trust with the other members of the class. By the end of the 22 weeks, a strong sense of community emerges. They usually hate to see the series of classes come to an end.

Those who are already members of the parish find that they are closer to each other. Those who decide to join the Church come into her already having a close relationship with some of her members whom they met in the class. Members even who attend different series of the classes feel closer to each other. The result is that the Body of Christ is built up.

I recommend keeping a series going all the time. At the very least, do one once a year. Do not wait until you have outsiders ready to attend. Plan it and announce it and then invite people to it. The ideal is for every member of the congregation to attend every few years.

I have used this course to found a new congregation in a nearby town which had no Episcopal church. All it takes to start a mission from scratch is one person who or family which is willing to be host and invite friends and acquaintances to the classes.

Experience has convinced me that the people who have the most success inviting contemporaries to the classes are adults in their late twenties, thirties, and early forties. School teachers especially are in a good position to attract others to the classes. People over fifty, as a rule, are less ready to consider radical changes regard to church and religion.

In Hazlehurst, Georgia, in 1981, we began with one family. the wife was an Episcopalian. The husband was not. We spent several months recruiting people for the class and found only a handful. But we began. It is essential for the missionary to make it clear that he will stick with it as long as there is anyone at all who is interested.

We advertised the classes in the local paper every week. And slowly a few others came to the class. A couple of Episcopalians came out of the woodwork and started attending the classes.

The first series of classes began on the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, January 28, 1981. In June the course came to an end. We continued to meet during the summer for discussion of subjects of interest. On the last Sunday of August, we began having the Eucharist at 5:00 p. m. in Good

Shepherd Roman Catholic Church. That allowed people who were attending other churches to try us out without initially cutting their existing ties.

In this way the Episcopal Church of St. Thomas Aquinas was founded.

Because of its solid doctrinal and spiritual foundation, it has survived my leaving, having a supply priest for nine months, getting a vicar who lived in the town of the parent church and left after a year, and then having several supply priests until finally a resident priest came who promptly moved the church to Baxley, about thirty miles away and besides all that, having the founding family move away about a year after I left.

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