
The Christian Way of Life: It Begins with Immersion

Becoming fluent in the language of faith through the lens of learning a language

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To live the Christian way of life, one should be fluent in the language of faith. Becoming fluent in a language does not happen overnight. It does not happen in one hour a week. It takes an immersion, a daily immersion, and being surrounded by others who speak the same language and have the same culture. The Christian way of life begins with immersion in the waters of baptism. In what ways are we daily immersed in these waters as a reminder of who we are and whose we are?

In today's world, we need to revisit what it means to define the culture of our faith and encourage effective ways to live the Christian way of life. This article addresses a shift from being pastoral-led to lay-empowered. A shift from one hour a week to every day and night in our homes. A shift from talking to listening. A shift from lecturing to hands-on involvement. And a shift from planning programs where faith talk happens once a week to explaining the importance of daily faith talk that builds and strengthens relationships in the home and in the community.

The Christian way of life begins at baptism. The promises made to affirm one's baptism are:

- to live among God's faithful people
- to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper
- to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
- to serve all people, following the example of Jesus
- to strive for justice and peace in all the earth¹

Parents, grandparents, and sponsors are addressed at the baptism of a child who may not be able to answer for themselves and entrusted with these responsibilities for raising the child in the faith. It is very clear that the expectation will be to fulfill the baptismal promises. What seems to have gotten lost along the way is intentionality about equipping and empowering the baptized and those who made the promises with skills and tools to realize those promises.

Daily practice in the home, community, and world are needful, an integral part of learning to become fluent. Practice is done

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through developing rituals and traditions that form a culture of loving one's neighbor as one's self twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Christians are followers of Jesus. Jesus is the way of life: "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

If someone were to visit you in your home, in what ways would that person recognize that you lead a Christian way of life? Is it something visible, the way you act, or the way you speak? It is all of these and more.

Faith as a second language

The analogy I use is how one learns a language as a way of navigating through the building, growing, and establishing of a Christian way of life. Learning to become fluent in a language requires being immersed in that language and culture. Becoming fluent happens one of two ways: Being raised in a family where the language is spoken or going to live with a family in a country where the language is spoken, so that you are surrounded daily by those who live and speak the language. Becoming fluent in the language of faith happens in the same way, when one is surrounded by a family who speaks and practices the language in their home and is part of a faith community where the language is spoken.

My background is in language. My degree is in Spanish and I am fluent in Spanish. I lived in Spain for more than four years and in "Little Mexico" in Chicago for three years. I did not have to speak English at all during my time in either location. I had truly been immersed in the Spanish-speaking culture and language. I was surrounded by both families and the community where

1. Affirmation of Baptism, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 237.

the language was spoken. I have taught Spanish and English as a Second Language in many different settings. It is from this life experience that I draw the analogy and use “faith as a second language” as a way to describe what I believe to be an effective approach to learning the language of faith in the setting of congregations with the goal of becoming fluent. We tend to assume that all who come through our doors, and even those who have been in the faith community for years, speak the language of faith. I have discovered this is not true. There is a need to equip all ages to live and speak their faith daily and to understand the vital role this has in defining the Christian way of life.

‘English as a Second Language’ analogy

In the U.S., most learn a foreign language in school. Language classes generally meet four or five times a week for an hour or more. After three or four years of a foreign language, one would expect that this would lead to fluency, but it does not. Fluency does not happen in three or four hours a week. Fluency does not happen without speaking the language. This is a fact. The same applies when learning the language of faith. Yet even in a healthy congregation, we make assumptions that those who are involved in worship or faith formation for no more than two hours a week, are fluent in their faith.

There is a difference between learning a language to use when going to visit a foreign country and learning a language that is not your native language in a country where you are going to live and raise a family. There are many immigrants who have come to the U.S. and live in settings where they need to learn English for daily living. They need to learn it to go shopping, work, drive, become citizens, understand their own children (who attend English-speaking schools), and be able to do daily tasks in the community. English as a Second Language classes help a person practice speaking the language with the goal of learning the language and the culture of daily living in the new country. One needs to immerse oneself daily in speaking and practicing the language to become fluent. This results in a new way of life.

There is a difference between learning the language of faith and speaking it in a faith community one or two hours a week compared to learning to speak the language of faith daily in the home and beyond the home. As Christians, we begin with an immersion in the waters of baptism and we need to remind ourselves to immerse ourselves daily in these waters. In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther writes that we are to make the sign of the holy cross daily before the morning and evening prayer. This is a reminder of our baptism and we are to immerse ourselves daily in this practice. Developing rituals and traditions to practice daily, such as scripture reading, prayer, and blessings, are ways we practice faith. Immersion leads to fluency and reflects our way of life as followers of Jesus.

When we become fluent in a language, it is natural to thirst to be with others who speak the same language. What implications does this have for Christians as we reflect on the language we speak? One becomes fluent when surrounded in the community

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and in the home by the language. How are we helping those of all ages during the time we have each week in the congregation to understand what it means to be immersed in the waters of baptism daily in the home and beyond the home?

A shift in culture

I would like to say that I am fluent in my faith but admit that I am still growing, and I truly understand the need to delve into daily faith practices. But wait! It was not until I was in my mid-forties that I even realized that I *am* on a faith journey. How can this be? My answer is one that I have discovered over many years of conversations with people of a variety of ages in congregations across the country. I discovered that what happened to me also applies to others. Hundreds have been able to relate to and gain clear understanding of our challenges in the church today from the analogy of learning a language.

My husband and I were raised in the Lutheran church in different parts of the country. We raised our children in the church and attended weekly worship. We volunteered in many ways and taught Sunday school. Yet, I do not remember being told about the importance of faith practices in my daily life or that my husband and I were the primary faith role models for our three boys. We felt we were doing a fine job of raising our sons in the faith.

The next story is very similar to the stories I have heard many times in congregations across the U.S. as well as in Australia and Canada. It is with this in mind that I ask you to reflect both on your own story and those of your family, neighbors, and congregational members as we ponder the changes needed to challenge the existing faith culture, breaking out of the “church bubble” to move outside the church walls into the home, beyond the home, and into the community.

My story

My great grandfather was a mason and built the church where I was raised. It was a small congregation and very family-oriented. I was “immersed” in the waters of baptism there. St. John’s Lutheran Church in Scotrun, Pennsylvania, was big enough to seat fifty at the most for worship. I was surrounded by parents, grandparents, family, and friends. My parents took me to church every Sunday. My mother taught Sunday school; my father was on council. Aunts

and uncles and grandparents sang in the choir, played the organ, and were highly involved in the congregation. St. John's was part of a three-point parish. I was confirmed and married there. I was surrounded by a true cloud of witnesses. Surely, I had been immersed in the language of faith. Or had I?

My husband and I have lived in many different places. One of the first things we would do, whether in the U.S., Spain, or Japan, was to find a faith community where we could worship. We have three sons and raised them in the faith, just as we had been raised. All three were baptized, confirmed, and worshiped with us regularly in Lutheran congregations. My questions are these: With this background and history in our family, why did I not understand the importance of my role in the faith formation of my own children until I actually worked in a congregation? And why did we not speak faith in our home?

Years were spent faithfully attending worship, volunteering as a Sunday school teacher, saying grace at the table, and praying night time prayers with our boys, but all the while I did not know that I was the primary faith role model for our children. How can this be?

I was in my mid-forties when our pastor came to me one day and asked me if I wanted to be on staff because, as he put it: "You are here every day volunteering anyway!" I said yes without blinking an eye. I had no idea how my life would change.

After working in a congregation for twelve years and being a faith formation consultant for over twenty-five years, I have now learned the importance of empowering all ages to learn to speak the language of faith daily through their actions and words.

The answer

In his book, *Shepherd of Souls*, David W. Anderson writes: "Shepherding souls can be understood through the Reformation theme of the priesthood of all believers, also referenced as the spiritual or universal priesthood, language that is particularly related to the work of Martin Luther and subsequent Protestantism."² We are to minister to and shepherd one another as we witness the love of Jesus in the world. I use my background of teaching language to equip parents, grandparents, and other adults with tools and a fundamental understanding of the importance of speaking faith at home daily and beyond. This leads to an immersion in faith practices and sets us on a journey to a way of life, a Christian way of life.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

2. David W. Anderson, *Shepherd of Souls, Faith Formation through Trusted Relationships* (Milestones Ministry, LLC, 2018), 15.

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and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4–9)

The Life of Faith Initiative is a grassroots effort within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). One of the objectives listed on the website is: *To equip people to live out their faith in family, workplace, school, local community, and the world.*³ I propose we view ways to live into the Christian way of life and assist the priesthood of all believers in being able to speak the language of the baptized in every setting we encounter on a daily basis as listed in the objective: family, workplace, school, local community, and world.

Consider the questions I asked earlier in relationship to this objective: With my background of being brought up in the church and the history of our family, why did I not understand the importance of my role in the faith formation of my children until I actually worked in a congregation? And why did we not speak about our faith in our home?

The clear answer is that although I was raised in the church, I was learning about my faith as though I was attending a language class. I was learning about it but not learning how to live it in daily life. I did not perceive a need for that. It was more like a foreign language than one I needed to learn for daily living. My parents and grandparents were clearly practicing their faith in one location weekly. We very rarely spoke of it as part of our daily lives when we gathered as family in other settings. As a parent, I modeled the same practice of going to worship weekly and participating in faith formation in one setting, the congregation.

When my father was 90 years old, I asked why he thought it was important to raise me in the church. He replied: "Because that's what you do!" For his generation and mine as well, attending church weekly was the norm. Times have changed. This is no longer the norm. Our culture is changing and there is an urgency to address what it means to meet people where they are in their faith walk. This looks very different than the church where people only came because that's what you do.

Walking the walk

As a Christian educator, I learned to talk the talk. I knew what resources to use and how to place them in the hands of children and adults. But nothing clicked until I realized that it is not talking the talk that makes a difference, it is walking the walk. I realized that if I was not doing in my own family what I was asking others to do, I would never know if it really worked. So, it began. By that

3. Life of Faith Initiative, <http://lifeoffaith.info>

time one son was out of high school, another in middle school, and the youngest in second grade. I wondered if it was too late to start. I had to try. My husband and I began to take time for caring conversations in our home about the faith. We read scripture, prayed, and blessed one another daily. It became our way of life. After a few years—yes, years, not days or even weeks—we noticed that we had developed very honest, trusting relationships, especially with our youngest son. We, too, had been growing in our faith alongside one another. Our other two sons noticed the difference in our way of life. I believe our grandchildren now reap the benefits of this way of life, which led to my passion for helping others to understand the importance of living our baptism daily through practice.

To learn a language, you have to practice speaking it. To become fluent in a language, you have to practice every day and find settings where you can learn more. To live the Christian way of life, you have to practice. To become fluent in the Christian way of life, you have to speak it daily. You cannot become fluent in a language without practice. How does one become a pianist? One practices. A soccer player or football player cannot become good without practice either.

Daily practice for Christians

My friend and colleague, David W. Anderson, named four faith practices for living one's baptism in his doctoral work. David identified and named the Four Key Faith Practices. They have a common thread that nurtures faith formation within one's life journey. These essential faith practices articulate a foundational spirituality that shapes the work of congregations and the lives of Christians. Faith is formed through relationships, and those relationships engage in fundamental Christian practices. These basic faith practices are evident in Scripture, church history, and modern research. It is through such practices that faith is transmitted between the generations and over time.

The Four Key Faith Practices provide a helpful outline for us to keep in mind as we explore ways to equip others with tools to be immersed in the Christian way of life:

1. **Caring Conversations:** These conversation starters provide meaningful reflection on biblical texts and our daily lives. It helps you bond with others on the journey of faith. It also helps you in the important task of talking about your Christian faith.
2. **Devotions:** Being devoted to God's Word serves as the foundation for practicing the presence of God and blessing you with faith, hope, and love. Having a special time of day to do devotions increases the regularity of this important practice in your life.
3. **Service:** Christ tells us to serve others. By living the faith in love, we learn the value and joy of the Christian faith. Serving others reminds us of the breadth of the kingdom of God and

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that our faith is personal but not private. Faith motivates us to serve the world in love.

4. **Rituals and Traditions:** Symbolic actions grounded in the Christian tradition throughout the year provide a beautiful and holistic way of experiencing the grace of God. As you practice rituals and traditions, continue to use the ones that fill you with peace, passion, meaning, and hope.⁴

Be intentional, Set expectations, Be accountable

I suggest three steps for leaders in the church: 1) Be intentional, 2) Set expectations, and 3) Be accountable.

If we are not intentional, do not set expectations, and then have a plan to follow up, our efforts are fruitless. It is not about us as leaders in the congregation. It is about us empowering others to be leaders of the faith in their own homes. There are times when I felt this might lead me to lose my own job as a faith leader. The fact is, should we not want to be losing our job as primary faith role model to others, when research shows that parents have the most potential to make a real difference in the lives of their children?

I learned the importance of being intentional the hard way when I was working in the congregation. My assumption was that whatever I asked parents to do with their children in my role as Director of Children and Youth Ministry would be done in the home. I never asked if they were actually doing it. We all thought we were being good Christian parents. We brought our children to worship and Christian education classes every week. Is that not enough? The answer is no.

Being intentional as a first step provides the opportunity to build trusting relationships and place resources into the hands of those who spend more than one or two hours a day together. *Setting the expectation* that resources be used in the home does

4. Milestones Ministry, LLC, <https://milestonesministry.org/history-of-the-four-keys/>

not guarantee it will happen. But when it does, stories abound! As leaders, it is not our place to share the stories but rather to encourage others to tell their own stories of faith. When a parent or grandparent experiences being blessed by a child at home or talks about what it means to be a Christian beyond the church walls, it is a moment to tell the story. I have yet to meet an adult who has experienced a prayer, blessing, or act of kindness in their home or community who is not excited about sharing the story with others. In what ways do we provide the opportunity to practice telling our stories, in order to learn to tell them to others?

Being accountable means we follow up and ask about the resources being sent home. If we never ask what does and does not work, how do we know what helps?

It is time to envision and live into the changing culture of the church. We need to challenge ourselves to envision the Christian way of life beyond the church walls. I encourage you to meet people where they are and envision a setting beyond the congregational walls. This shifts us from a pastoral-led model to a lay-empowered one. Our immersion in the waters of baptism is lived out through an immersion into the Christian way of life through speaking and practicing the faith daily, so that we move one day at a time closer to fulfilling the Great Commandment.

[Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt 22:37–39)

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To conclude, I ask that you ponder these questions:

- In what ways are all ages in your congregation given tools to practice speaking their faith within and beyond the church walls?
- If you asked each person in your congregation to name ways they are being immersed daily in the Christian way of life, how would they answer?
- If we are immersed in speaking faith daily, what implications does this have for spreading the good news to our friends and neighbors who may not speak the faith?