



## Helpful Hints for Church Leaders Considering Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

### I. Understand the Spiritually Transforming Nature of CGS:

- CGS is an oral and experiential method of evangelism most closely approximating spiritual direction for children. Over three levels and nine years, in a customized environment called an atrium, children experience a series of developmentally appropriate “presentations” and are provided hand-made materials to reflect on them.
- CGS utilizes the Montessori method of teaching and has been developed over fifty years of direct work with children. It is not a published or printed curriculum. Consistency in content is achieved through a Formation Course resembling a 90-hour apprenticeship. Each leader, called a catechist, uses an “album” of presentations. Adults in training experience the presentation, just as children do, and participate in a process of theological reflection and group discussion. This discussion results in writing a group statement of Doctrinal Content and Direct Aim for each presentation, which is summarized in an “album page.” Over time, album pages deepen as ongoing spiritual reflection occurs, and catechists generally rewrite their own album pages to reflect these insights.
- This method makes it necessary to have at least one trained person per atrium level in your church. These people may train others to lead and assist them but an atrium cannot be effectively run by an untrained person. The deep spiritual benefits of the program for the broader parish depend on respecting this process. Albums cannot be used as though they are printed curriculum, or as a substitute for attending a formation course, without compromising the values of the program.
- Formation Courses are led by nationally certified Formation Leaders. Formation Leaders complete all three levels (about 300 hours) of training and create an original album for the Levels they teach. In addition they have attended a formation leaders’ course for the Level they teach.
- Materials provided to the children are hand-made by the catechist or the parish as part of their prayer. Patterns are found in Material Manuals which are available only to those who are enrolled in a Formation course.

### II. Understand the Theological Background of CGS:

CGS achieves its success because it teaches as Jesus did, employing the Parable Method as its medium. CGS models a Benedictine spirituality that values silence, work, and prayer. Its development is rooted in insights of the church fathers, but is also incorporates more recent theological insights such as those of De Chardin and Ricoeur. CGS thus is:

- Christological and Trinitarian;
- Strongly incarnational;
- Global;

- Inclusive;
- Sacramental and catholic.

Above all, CGS has a dynamic view of Scripture. The method directly proclaims scripture to the children with as little explanation or elaboration as possible. CGS trusts God, and trusts children, to develop a relationship of mutual love.

### **III. Begin CGS the Best Way:**

- CGS has the reputation of spiritually transforming whole parishes. Starting CGS may have far more to do with the Kingdom of God and the growth of your church than anything else your vestry does. Prayerfully seek out and personally ask people to engage in this ministry. It is an essential ministry of evangelism, not a new curriculum, babysitting or volunteer work. Treat the project with the dignity the ministry and the children deserve. Pray publicly for the development of the program.
- Take time to get the whole church to buy in before you begin. Sermons, a parent book study of one the many CGS publications, a “seed-planting” introductory presentation given by the Guild, presentations to the vestry, or a visit to another church’s atrium are all ways to begin. It is essential to remember that one enthusiastic person should not begin this. If you don’t have a Christian Education committee, start one well in advance. Allow significant time to build a team. (For this reason, CGS generally should not be begun during an interim period, although an interim is an excellent time for a seed-planting presentation.)
- Plan on sending three or more people to a Level I Formation course before you start. Sign on others to be materials-makers and ask others to do back-up organizational work.
- Budget for Formation Course tuition. Plan for the parish to pay a third of the cost. (Lay training grants are available though the diocese for another third.) The participants should provide the last third unless there is serious financial need. Churches that offer to cover childcare costs or ask for volunteers to do childcare for parents taking the training are more successful in getting people to attend.
- To begin, budget \$500 to \$1000 as atrium seed money. A major cost is shelving, but shelves can often be donated or built. After your atrium is started, most costs are for ongoing materials-making and replacement, and these costs can be spread out. Many materials end up being donated. Parishes find that CGS is, in the long run, cheaper than providing purchased curricula. Costs for setting up the atrium are “front-loaded.”
- Publicize that CGS is extremely environmentally friendly. There is no paper waste from discarded curricula, and simple recycled drawing paper is the main atrium art supply needed.

### **IV. Follow Through Well on Next Steps:**

- Keep the program visible and inviting. After your team is developed, involve as many parents/catechists/assistants as possible in planning. Keep the circle open and bring in new blood. Find beginner jobs for everyone, to make the barrier to participation low. Get parents inside the atrium, helping in some way. Getting people to assist is the best way to get them to take a formation course.
- Make it clear to the congregation that trained catechists do this work and that the course is a wonderful way to grow your own spiritual life. Plan on sending new people each year to be trained in a course. No individual does this forever. Letting the atria rest on one or two people will eventually endanger the whole program, because it undercuts the spiritual values implicit in the program. Actively, seek and pray for new catechists. You might set a goal to recruit a certain number each year. A general invitation can prepare the ground but won’t

generally “make the sale.” Give possible catechists a course brochure and personally ask them to consider taking the course.

- Schedule the year’s class times in advance, some time between May & July. Distribute the schedule to parents, so they can plan well in advance. Review and update as needed. Don’t schedule too many breaks. More than one week off in a row discourages regular attendance. If possible, consolidate your atria on “Low Sundays” rather than cancel.
- Continually re-present the nature and intention of CGS and the atmosphere of the atrium. Material can be handed out, posted on the web site, run in the newsletter or presented in an orientation. Communicate through multiple channels. Commission and thank your catechists and assistants. Atriums should be included in parish prayers several times a year. Have a catechist or assistant write a short paragraph in the newsletter or leaflet about how they have benefited spiritually from serving in the atrium. Have someone do the same orally during the announcement time. This is a good prelude to inviting people to take the formation course or assist in the atrium.
- Consider formal, required parent orientations. Parents value quality and have required orientations for nursery school, sports teams and school trips, so don’t view such orientations as impossible before you try them. A yearly open atrium is a good idea.
- Atrium art has deep spiritual content and often reflects liturgical or seasonal themes. Post the children’s art, or celebrate it in a public way. Atrium art makes good leaflet covers for Kick-Off Sunday, Family or Children’s Sabbath.
- Catechesis presentations make excellent sermons, vestry mediations and Adult ed classes. Demonstrating the method shares it at a deeper level than talking about it.

## **V. Continually Care for your Catechists and Team:**

- “Talk the talk and walk the walk” of children’s theology as nurtured in the CGS. This program is foreign to the old “chalk & talk” Sunday School model. Be certain you understand the differences yourself before you implement the program.
- Don’t expect the catechists to run your whole children’s program. Recruit others to do the pageant, registration, greeting, and special holy day events. The Christian formation of baptized children is the whole church’s task!
- Consult with catechists about the calendar. Make sure your other children’s programs are complementary with your atrium program. Do not cut into atrium time for performances, music or children’s liturgies without consultation.
- Understand that there are special problems in requesting catechists to share space with other programs. Learn what these problems are and plan for them.
- Visit the atrium to celebrate and pray with the children and catechists whenever possible. Become familiar with the various special celebrations that take place in the atrium and participate.
- Learn and respect the norms of atrium behavior and model that respect in your own conduct there. Catechists work hard to instill in children the conviction that the atrium is sacred space. Treat it as such yourself.
- Thank your catechists and again and again. Try to plan and take part in catechists’ retreats. Make sure your catechists are aware you value the depth of their commitment to this unique program.

Compiled 2007-09-04 from various sources, including the Rev. Joyce Scherer-Hoock (St. Anne’s, Lincoln) and Kate Cabot (St. Paul’s, Newburyport).