

A CONGREGATION LEARNING Reaching for the stars- or is it?

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A Learning Congregation Focus

The focus of this article is on the Congregation as a Learning Community. The intention of this article is to explore some aspects of the Church as a learning community. Such an exploration broadens and deepens an understanding of Christian Education. Consideration will be given to the learning that can take place in a congregation and to ways of developing a learning congregation. Disciples of Jesus are learners in the Christian faith and life, responding to “moments of learning from God”.ⁱ A learning Church learns from God as did Jesus. The development of a learning community helps people to grow in their faith and maturity in Christ.

The Anglican Parish of Glen Osmond has a vision statement which reads, “We aim to be a worshipping, caring, learning and serving Christian Community”.ⁱⁱ These four aspects of Christian Community are essential. Much has been written over the years about the worshipping, caring and serving aspects of Christian Community. Much has been written and taught on Christian Education and the teaching and learning methods. Until more recently, not so much has been written about the Christian learning community.

Recent writing

In recent years the Christian Education literature on learning communities has increased. The Education Newsletter No.1, 1997 for the World Council of Churches (WCC) reminded readers that in 1974 the WCC had published a book called “Learning Community “ by John Sutcliffe. This book was based on the work of a European Consultation held in 1973. In this book it was argued that “ the churches should think about the total educational, service and worship programme of the church as an integrated activity. People learn most from what the church did and took for granted and least from what it said.”ⁱⁱⁱ Writing in 1997 WCC Education Newsletter John Sutcliffe commented that “The majority of Churches have probably not heard the phrase ‘learning community’”. That may still be the case in 2004.

There are however a number of publications available. *The Learning Congregation- a new vision of leadership* by Thomas R. Hawkins was published in 1997.^{iv} *Congregations as Learning Communities –tools for shaping your future*, by Dennis G. Campbell was published in 2000.^v The Centre for Parish Development, Chicago, USA published material in 1998 on *Becoming a Learning System*, like others translating understandings of a ‘learning organisation’ to apply to communities of faith. The Board of Education for The Church of England in 1999 published a document called *A Learning Church for a Learning Age*.^{vi} *The Church As Learning Community – a Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* by Norma Cook Everist was published in 2002.^{vii} In 2003 Uniting Education , a national agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, published five articles of mine on their website under the overall title *Being a Learning Community in the Parish- recognising how it is and seeing what it could become*.^{viii} What I wrote in those articles was based on my own experience and reading at the time. The ideas outlined there have been confirmed by

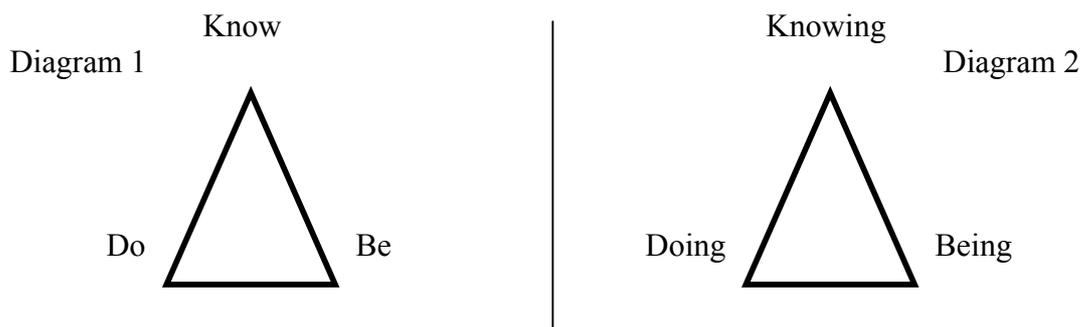
subsequent experience and reading. Uniting Education UCA. is keen to further promote an understanding of the congregation as a learning community.^{ix} The Ministry Development Council in The Anglican Diocese of Adelaide 2003 Discussion paper called ‘Exploring Next Steps Ministry Development’ included a section on ‘Developing a learning community’.^x In researching material for this article I was pleased to rediscover the Anglican Principle of Dispersed Authority and its implications for the church as learning community. In the Anglican Consultative Council Panama City Report 1996 it is stated that, because of the various sources of authority and the variety in its organisational structures the Anglican Church is “ ‘a learning Church’ as well a teaching Church”.^{xi}

Knowledge Society.

The debate in Australian society in the last decade or so about the knowledge society and Smart Nation provides insights to assist our theme. In the Australian College of Education Year Book 2003 called “Teachers as Leaders in a Knowledge Society”, Professor Frank Crowther (editor) defines a Smart Nation from an education perspective. He writes that a Smart Nation consists of “ communities of people working together so that their collective intelligence results in the creation of new knowledge to enhance their quality of life and contribute to a sustainable and better world for others”.^{xii} In the Education Review Professor Crowther is reported to have said that “ if you read the various chapters (in the Year Book 2003) a clear picture emerges that a knowledge society is one where people are in the constant process of creating new ideas about how to improve the quality of life”.^{xiii} Life-long learning and life-wide learning are also discussed in the Year Book.^{xiv} Life-wide learning recognises that learning takes place in different ways in different places. A congregation learning is a ‘knowledge society’ in miniature, people seeing new ways of learning the faith. The idea of a learning congregation is the result of God’s People thinking laterally about the Body of Christ, the Church. These new ideas aim to assist the Church to be increasingly effective in the cause of Jesus Christ, who encourages us to love God and our neighbours as ourselves. These ideas help us to see afresh that the New Testament Christian Communities were learning communities under God’s guidance in Christ Jesus, as are Christian Communities today.

Adult Education-seeing it whole.

When Christian Education is seen in the context of a whole congregation, the range of opportunities expands. If all members of the congregation are considered in the learning programme offered and lateral thinking is applied, creative options can emerge not only for children and young people but for adults too. Ken Ostermiller from the United Church of Christ USA suggests in Adult Education that three domains of learning be considered: knowing, being and doing.



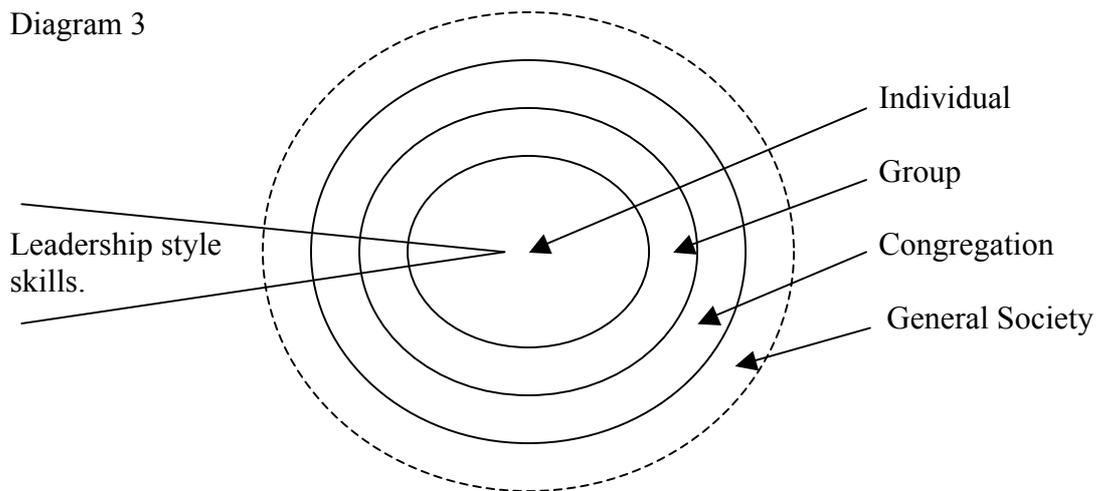
Ken Ostermiller writes that, “While these domains of learning are not really separate from one another, many persons find themselves more attracted to learning which begins with their own interest and experience. Some persons will sign up for an academic Bible Study every time. Others will only come to activities which they think will relate to them personally. Still others are interested in the connection of the faith to issues in the world.”^{xv}

In the 2004 Parish Lenten programme at St Saviour’s Anglican Church, Glen Osmond this understanding was used and a range of opportunities were offered for different age groups, individual interests and ways of learning. The publicity leaflet stated that there are those who respond to a KNOWING approach (Exploring our Faith through Bible Study as an individual or a group). Others respond to a BEING approach (Exploring our Faith through Spirituality), and others respond to a DOING approach (Exploring Faith through action).

Four Aspects of Leadership.

When the congregation is seen as a learning community four people-centred aspects appear for consideration: the individual, the group, the congregation as a whole, and the general society where Christians live and work and those who do not belong to a community of faith live and work. Leadership skills are required for each of these four significant congregational responsibilities.

Diagram 3



Thomas Hawkins in his book “The Learning Congregation” situates the Church Community in the ‘speed of change’ environment of the late twentieth century. No longer do we experience the river of time as slow, peaceful and stable. Rather we live in a permanent white water society, “ white water rafting through the rapids of social, technological and demographic change”.^{xvi} In this environment a learning congregation is “ continually expanding its capacity to create its future”.^{xvii} Learning at the speed of change requires a new type of leader who can relate different aspects of learning. “ Learning occurs at three levels: the individual, the team and the congregational levels”, writes Hawkins.^{xviii} The chapters in his book take up these themes in detail: Fostering Individual Learning, Facilitating Team learning, Cultivating Congregational Learning and Leading at the speed of Change. Biblical examples illustrate the themes throughout the book.

In the Congregation Learning leaders need to be equipped with a leadership style and skills which can assist individuals, groups and congregations as well as

those in the general community learn the faith. (see diagram 3 above) Leaders of learning congregations are themselves learners, and create opportunities when the whole People of God can gather to shape and reshape the meaning of life in the gospel of Jesus Christ.^{xix} Leadership becomes increasingly an educative task.^{xx} This is a collaborative, multi-skilled and shared leadership style which encourages the discipleship of all members of the church. This kind of networked congregation with a collaborative and shared approach may seem to some to be reaching for the stars! I assure them that it is worth the effort and consultation required.

An Example.

A Parish example will illustrate the approach to Congregational learning. During 2003 St Saviour's Anglican Church Community, Glen Osmond in South Australia held a series of discussions on the "Contemporary use of the Interior of the Church Building for Worship and Mission'. Forty six parishioners were involved. The discussions and a Special Parish (Vestry) meeting "revealed a very strong Parish view that we should recarpet, install air conditioners and make changes to the interior of the Church to promote a less hierarchial and more inclusive structure to our worship services".^{xxi} Forty nine parishioners attended the Vestry meeting with twelve apologies. These changes were ready for Easter 2004 as a new life symbol. The altar table was moved forward and a new arc seating plan in the nave was implemented. The Congregation is now living into these changes. The reordering of the interior of St Saviour's church building is but one example of congregational learning. The overall effectiveness of these changes to the church interior has been amazing.

Five Disciplines to consider.

The source of much of the thinking about 'learning organisations' and 'learning communities' derives from a book by Peter Senge from USA. His book is called, *The Fifth Discipline- the art and practice of the Learning Organisation*.^{xxii} Senge invites his readers to see the whole- to envisage the whole congregation. He does this by giving consideration to five disciplines of the learning organisation: Systems Thinking, Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Building Shared Vision and Team Learning. Most writers on learning communities or learning congregations refer to Senge's seminal work *The Fifth Discipline*. Each of these five disciplines relates to the life of a congregation.

It is a worthwhile exercise to evaluate aspects of the life of the congregation by using the Five disciplines. The mental models or assumptions about the practice of children's and youth ministry can be described and analysed. Such evaluation may lead to beneficial outcomes. Further discussion of systems thinking and mental models would suggest that in a learning community there are three approaches to leadership and all are needed at various times and stages in the life of a congregation. These three styles of leadership are: operational (day to day matters), strategic (with objectives and goals) and transformational (personal and cultural change).^{xxiii}

Jesus and the Five disciplines.

Each of these disciplines also relates to the way Jesus approached his task all those years ago, and each relates to the early Church. During his lifetime Jesus sought

to build a *shared vision* of God's Kingdom. "A shared vision is not an idea but a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power", writes Senge.^{xxiv} Jesus' experience of the God of love, his communion with the sacred presence of God convinced him that God's realm was alive and active in the universe, and that he was to be instrumental, indeed the key in communicating that realm to others. Again and again in the Gospel passages we hear Jesus say that, "The Kingdom of God is like...salt, leaven, pearl of great price... Jesus continually taught his disciples the basic assumptions and values of God's realm; the *mental models* or attitudes of God's kingdom influenced how they understood the world and caused them to take certain actions. The great influential readings from the Bible are excellent examples of the Christian mindset on reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5), on peace and compassion (Matthew 12: 1-12). Jesus communicated these attitudes which belong to God's realm and he lived them. He lived and taught the two great commandments to love God and our neighbours as ourselves. As one business expressed it, "Respect heaven and love people".^{xxv}

As individuals we identify our own personal vision with Jesus' vision of God's realm and its values. By *personal mastery* we learn and live that realm more and more- disciples of Jesus are learners. The discipline of personal growth and learning is the responsibility of each Christian disciple. To adapt Peter Senge's words "Congregations (organisations) learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee congregation learning, but without it no congregational learning occurs".^{xxvi} As we respond to God's love and grace in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit we learn more and more as disciples.

And so Christian Community is formed and the church exists to live and spread the Gospel of Christ. *Systems Thinking* encourages us to see the Church Community as a whole, to see the congregation as an organic being, as a whole body. St Paul called that whole body 'The Body of Christ' (1Corinthians 12). In a body one thing happening affects another part of the body and we have to look deeper to see the cause of the happenings. At St Saviour's we successfully upgraded the kitchen, then the Meeting Room which in turn suggested that we look at the interior of the church building too. Systems Thinking invites us to see how one thing affects another. The attitudes or mental models in a congregation may influence what is done. If the attitudes or mental models are examined that may change how things are done and those decisions may lead to better outcomes. Such an examination could be undertaken by a team of people and the outcomes would be the result of *Team Learning*.

Within the life of the congregation there will be teams of people learning more and more as they go on in Christian Ministry. Such teams could be Parish Council, small Bible study groups, Outreach group, Choir... Jesus had a team of twelve disciples. The Parish teams will hopefully build a shared vision, seeking to live the gospel values by learning as individuals but working together in the name of Christ.

A Congregation learning for the future.

The Fifth Discipline is an exciting, insightful and wise but densely packed book on the learning organisation mainly using corporate business examples. Yet its principles are adaptable to congregational life as I have attempted to illustrate above. Dennis Campbell in his book *Congregations as Learning Communities* also adapts for congregational use the tools that Senge and others have created. Campbell states that Senge himself came to use the term "learning community" in place of the term

“learning organisation”.^{xxvii} Leaders who want their faith community to become a learning community will need to understand Senge’s five disciplines Campbell suggests. He agrees with Senge that ‘the future of every organisation depends on its ability to learn together as a community’.^{xxviii} Campbell offers a set of tools that will enable a congregation to remain open to what God is calling it to be. The four tools offered in Campbell’s book are: Tools for Systems Thinking, Appreciative Inquiry, Congregational Culture Analysis, and Scenario Planning. ‘Scenario Planning is a method for summarising alternative future trends’.^{xxix} Campbell states ‘that in our rapidly evolving religious scene, congregations that seek only to achieve some degree of stability, rather than constantly opening themselves to learning and responding to external and internal change, will surely die or, at best exist at a marginal level with little mission or ministry’.^{xxx}

This learning community emphasis on the whole is also underlined by Thomas Groome in an essay called *Total Catechesis/Religious Education- a vision for now and always*. Groome writes about ‘The Whole Parish as Catechetical Educator’ as follows; ‘The whole life of a parish community should be intentionally crafted to nurture the faith of its people. Every function of ministry should be done with a catechetical consciousness, that is, it should be deliberately crafted to educate in faith. Traditionally, we have thought of catechesis as a parish’s ministry of the word. But we must bring a catechetical consciousness to *all* functions of ministry. The whole life of a parish is its faith curriculum; everything about it should make it a teaching/learning community’.^{xxxi}

Some significant outcomes from the Learning Community approach.

There are a number of significant outcomes from this approach.

The learning community approach looks to the future. The topic suggests the ‘emerging of the new’ rather than ‘maintaining the old’ in the church community.^{xxxii} It is part of the discovery of the future church. It is part of speaking the gospel to future generations by involving as many disciples as possible in the congregational decision-making and planning for the future church. This is not really reaching for the stars because, to some extent, it is already happening as seen in the examples in this article.

This approach changes our thinking about Christian Education. In recent years I have come to the view that the study of the theory and practice of Christian Education these days must involve an initial discussion of parishes as learning communities, before looking at particular programmes or courses. Look at the whole before the parts. I was delighted recently to discover a book with this perspective on Christian Education. I am referring to Norma Cook Everist’s book *The Church as Learning Community*.^{xxxiii} On reading this book I felt affirmed in my view on this matter. It is pleasing to note that a Christian Educator in another part of the world has come to a similar conclusion. The topic of the congregation as a learning community is the basic assumption of her book. The purpose of her book is threefold: “to put forth a vision of the entire parish as learning community; to help faith communities create and maintain learning environments that facilitate us being different together in a pluralistic world; and to provide a comprehensive guide for religious educators leading a congregation toward becoming a learning community.”^{xxxiv} The author writes that “locally, the learning community includes not only the people gathered in the church on Sunday, but all the arenas of their daily lives all week long”.^{xxxv}

No longer can Christian Education consider the parts first before considering the whole. No longer can congregational leaders conduct Lenten Studies or Education For Ministry or Alpha groups to mention some examples, without first looking at the educational ministry for *all* in the congregation. If the whole is considered first the learning community will be better formed and Christian Education offerings and resources allocated more widely and effectively. Leaders will be able to move beyond resources and programmes towards the design of the educational ministry in a congregation.^{xxxvi} In that educational ministry design there must be as much care for the content as for the methods of learning.

The learning community approach helps each congregation identify educational ministry for the whole congregation. John Emmett and Ted Endecott of Uniting Education in Australia suggest that the congregation as learning community “approach to envisioning and developing educational ministry will become more significant for Christian Education as the Church becomes more ‘congregational’ in its style. This means a major move: *from* the denomination as a corporate interventionist force, predetermining a lot about style and delivery of educational ministry in each congregation (through programs and publications) *to* each congregation identifying educational ministry arising from its own interaction of gospel and culture”.^{xxxvii}

As well as the above there are a number of other significant outcomes from the learning community approach. Every member of the congregation is invited, encouraged and equipped to be a committed, informed and active disciple of Jesus Christ in the world. Leaders are equipped to be multi-skilled and multi-faceted in an educational ministry approach. Congregations are enabled to go on growing into the future. In my grandfather’s Prayer Book there is a quotation from Archbishop Frederick Temple which expressed the view that the test of a great person is that he/she will go on growing wherever you put them.^{xxxviii} That is also the test of a learning congregation, to go on growing in the community in which it is set.

A question to conclude.

I conclude by mentioning Michael Barber’s impressive book “The Learning Game- arguments for an Education Revolution”.^{xxxix} Barber defines a learning society as a society ‘in which every person is a learner’.^{xl} When he wrote this book he was Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, London, and wanted Britain to become ‘a nation of learners’.

In concluding his book Barber emphasises the importance of everyday conversation (the speech of the people) in creating a learning society. He comments that, on a social occasion, a most likely question is “What do you do?” meaning possibly, “What paid work do you do?” He proposes that the equivalent question for a learning society has to be “What did you learn today?”^{xli}

That question is also a very appropriate question in a congregation learning the faith. So, I finish on a lighter note. On social occasions and after Church on Sundays I invite you to ask people the question, “What did you learn today?” Enjoy the stimulating conversations and the inspirational faith sharing; all part of ‘the learning game’ in a learning community!

John Littleton

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- ⁱ Littleton J. (2003) *Being A Learning Community in the Parish*, Article Three, “Moments of Learning from God”, www.united.org.au
- ⁱⁱ see website www.stsavioursngo.net
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sutcliffe J. (1997) *Learning Community*, WCC Education Newsletter No. 1. Article p 2. An Australian, The Rev’d. Dr. David Merritt, then Director, Joint Board of Christian Education, spoke on a similar theme in a lecture given in 1984. He mentioned the common assertion that “everything the church is and does teaches” and spoke about the educational dimension of many aspects of the life of a congregation. Merritt D. (1984) *Towards Renewal of the Church- The Urgent Task of Christian Education*, Victorian Council of Christian Education, Melbourne, p.15 and p21.
- ^{iv} Hawkins T.R. (1997) *The Learning Congregation-A New Vision of Leadership*, Westminster John Knox Press USA.
- ^v Campbell D.G. (2000) *Congregations as Learning Communities- Tools for Shaping Your Future*, Alban Institute, USA.
- ^{vi} see website www.learningchurch.org.uk
- ^{vii} Everist N.C. (2002) *The Church As Learning Community-A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, USA.
- ^{viii} see websites www.united.org.au or www.stsavioursngo.net
- ^{ix} Emmett and Endacott (2004) *On Thin Ice..An investigation into Christian Education and Church health-2004 study tour of the USA and UK*. Uniting Education, p36.
- ^x Diocese of Adelaide (2003) *Exploring the Next Steps Ministry Development*, Discussion Paper, pp 13-15.
- ^{xi} Anglican Consultative Council X, Panama City (1996) *Being Anglican in the Third Millennium*, Morehouse Publishing, USA.p108
- ^{xii} Crowther F. (2003) *Teachers as Leaders in a Knowledge Society*, Australian College of Educators Year Book, Canberra, p5.
- ^{xiii} Education Review/Campus Review (June/July,2003), APN Educational Media Pty Ltd, North Sydney NSW., Article p20
- ^{xiv} Crowther F. (2003) Australian College of Educators Year Book, p30.
- ^{xv} Ostermiller R.Kenneth (2003) Conference worksheet handout *Adult Education Ideas* from Worship and Education Ministry, Local Church Ministries, A Covenanted Ministry of the United Church Of Christ, USA. Ken was guest leader at a 2003 Uniting Education Conference in Geelong, Victoria. The conference was entitled “Creating Lifelong Christian Education”. I participated in that Conference and received permission from Ken to use this material in an article. Ken is co-author of the book *The Rite of Confirmation- Moments when Faith is Strengthened*, Monkres and Ostermiller (1995) United Church Press, Ohio.
- ^{xvi} Hawkins TR. (1997) *The Learning Congregation*, p3.
- ^{xvii} Ibid. Page 5.
- ^{xviii} Ibid. Page 9.
- ^{xix} Ibid. Page 58.
- ^{xx} Ibid. Page 10.

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- xxi Report of the Wardens (February 2004) to the Annual Vestry Meeting, St Saviour's Anglican Church, Parish of Glen Osmond, Adelaide.
- xxii Senge P.M. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline- The Art & Practice of The Learning Organisation*, Random House Press.
- xxiii I found discussions with Craig Mitchell very helpful in regard to leadership styles, particularly his image of the ocean- the waves, the currents and the ocean floor . This explanation is available in his paper called *Engaging Congregations in Change*, October 2000. Craig is currently Mission Resourcing Network Resource Person, Uniting Church Synod of South Australia.
- xxiv Senge P.M. *The Fifth Discipline*, Page 206
- xxv *ibid.* Page 140.
- xxvi *Ibid.* Page 139. Another example to illustrate organisational learning and systems thinking as outlined on page five of this article, would be The Anglican Diocese of Adelaide . Members of the Diocese of Adelaide have been on a steep learning curve in recent months. This includes the central Diocesan leadership and administration as well as parishes and schools. Since May 31st. the Diocesan community has been learning to cope with the outcomes of the Report of the Inquiry into the handling of claims of sexual abuse and misconduct within the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. The Administrator of the Diocese gave a very helpful address to the Diocesan Synod on June 19th outlining the ensuing events and the processes involved in responding to the report. More details are available from Anglican Church Office, 26 King William Road, North Adelaide, 5006.
- xxvii Campbell D.G. (2000) *Congregations as Learning Communities*, p 3.
- xxviii *Ibid.* Page 1.
- xxix Senge P.M. , *The Fifth Discipline*, page 179.
- xxx Campbell DG. *Congregations as Learning Communities*, Page 1.
- xxxi Groome T.H. and Horell H.D.(2003) *Horizons and Hopes-The Future of Religious Education*, Paulist Press, USA., Chapter 1, p22.
- xxxii Emmett and Endacott (2004) *On Thin Ice*, page 36.
- xxxiii Everist (2002) *The Church As Learning Community*, Abingdon Press
- xxxiv *Ibid.* page 11.
- xxxv *Ibid.* page 10
- xxxvi Emmett J.A.(2002) *The Godbearing Life- Faithful Everyday Living, Discipleship in Action*, a Workbook for Leaders of Educational Ministries, Uniting Education, Collingwood, Melbourne. p 45. I am grateful to John Emmett for this insight about moving beyond resources to the design of educational ministry in congregations. John spoke on this topic on 13-8-2003 at a National Christian Education Conference held in Geelong,, organised by Uniting Education on "Creating Lifelong Christian Education".
- xxxvii Emmett and Endacott (2004) *On Thin Ice*, pages 29 & 36.
- xxxviii My grandfather was The Right Rev'd. G. H. Cranswick, a former Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland in Victoria, 1917-1941. Archbishop Frederick Temple was Archbishop of Canterbury , 1896-1902.
- xxxix Barber M. (1997) *The Learning Game, Arguments for an Education Revolution*, Indigo.
- xl *Ibid.* page 241.
- xli *Ibid.* page 304.