

# Christian Education ~ Then and Now

*By The Rev'd John Littleton, September 2005*

The vision statement of St Saviour's Anglican Church in the Parish of Glen Osmond reads, "We aim to be a worshipping, caring, learning and serving Christian Community."<sup>1</sup> These four aspects of Christian Community are essential and they are inter-related. The intention of this chapter is to explore the "learning" aspects of the Church, beginning with the past and focussing on the present.

Christian Education has to do with the formation and growth of individuals and congregations in their Christian faith, life and ministry, in response to God's sacred presence through Jesus Christ. Disciples of Jesus are learners in the Christian faith and life. Disciples in the twenty-first century are encouraged to be life-long learners in the context of a worshipping, caring, learning and serving Christian Community like St Saviour's, where faith is caught and taught. The programmes and approaches of Christian Education are various but usually they are intentional, sustained, systematic, relevant and flexible; helping people to grow in their commitment to Christ and the Christian life through participation and reflection.

## **The Then**

Before exploring the Christian Education scene in the present, what about the past? How did Christian Education develop during the twentieth century? A very brief outline of some trends may help.

In Anglican congregations there has been for many years Christian Education for children through Sunday School and for young people through Confirmation preparation and adults by annual Lenten Studies. The sermon in the context of worship promoted learning. Originating in the nineteenth century there was a very strong emphasis on Sunday School. In 1932 Anglicans Blackwood and Walton wrote a book called "Our Greatest Asset – A Handbook for Australian Sunday Schools", published by Angus and Robertson, Sydney. There was a great need for such a practical handbook the authors state in the introduction.<sup>2</sup>

In 1959 St Saviour's Kindergarten Room was added to the north side of the Old Hall. This is now called the annex. There were 160 children in St Saviour's Sunday School then, and 100 candidates were presented for Confirmation. Up until the 1960's and 1970's there were many large Sunday Schools in Australia. There was also Religious Instruction in State Schools taken by members of the Parish.

In the 1960's and 1970's Christian Education came to be seen as Ministry with, to and by children and young people. Youth Ministry and Youth groups received great emphasis. At the same time Adult Education was highlighted more and more. The Anglican National General Board of Religious Education (G.B.R.E.) introduced the adult "Education for Ministry" programme to the Australian Anglican Church in the 1970's. The National Anglican Church began publishing annual Lenten Study booklets for adult groups in the 1980's. From the mid 1980's until now ecumenical Bible Studies for groups have been prepared bi-annually by the Lenten Studies Committee of the South Australian Heads of Churches.

By the early 1980's Christian Education for children, young people and adults was the accepted description of the "learning" aspect of the Parish. It was at this time that "Resource Centres" for Christian Education were developed. The Anglican Board of Christian Education in the Diocese of Adelaide greatly expanded its Resource Centre provision in 1983, offering resource people and a wide range of resource materials for congregations to consider using with adults, young people, children and in the areas of education, worship, outreach and pastoral care. Parish consultations looking at the whole life of the Parish were held and resources provided.

Consequently the understanding grew that the whole life of the congregation educates, that "everything the church is and does teaches".<sup>3</sup> Such was the understanding from the mid 1980's to the mid 1990's when the concept of the congregation as a learning community took hold. The whole life of the parish community became the focus for education in the faith.

## **Priority for Education**

The priority given to Christian Education in 2005 varies in congregations, Dioceses and in the National arena in the Anglican Church of Australia. The track record for the learning aspects of congregational life has been changeable over the years. In the past there was a pattern of some Christian Education happening every now and then in the human life-cycle.

The place of Christian Education has waxed and waned over the years according to the financial priorities of parishes and dioceses. Often Christian Education is one of the first casualties when there are “cuts” to the budget. Insufficient funding was the main reason for the closure of the Australian National Anglican General Board of Religious Education (G.B.R.E.) in June 2002. Christian Education can at times be a popular priority and at other times a minority interest. A Uniting Church report in 2004 on Christian Education was entitled “On Thin Ice”.<sup>4</sup> Such an image captures the often fragile place that Christian Education has in the life of the church.

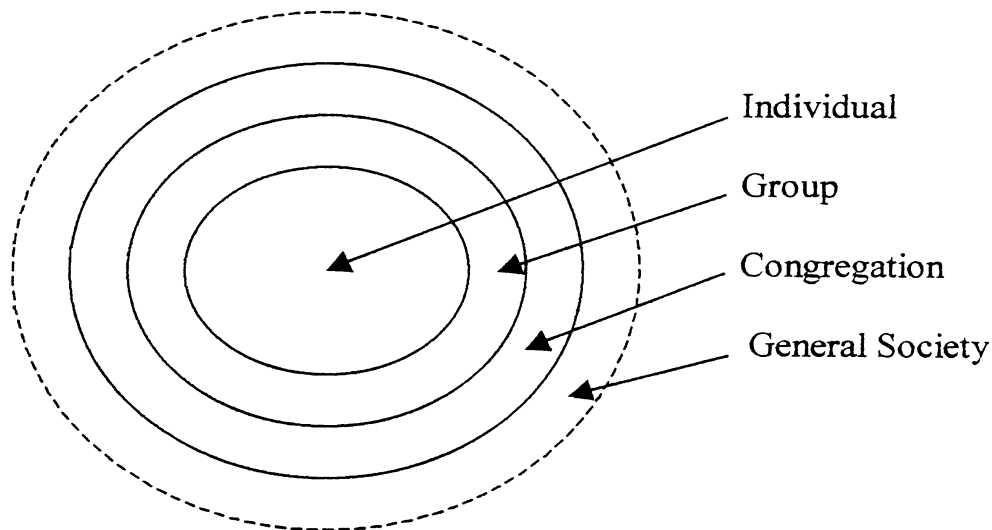
Reversing the “then and now” in the title of the chapter to “now and then” suggests an often tentative place for Christian Education is congregational life and in the lives of congregational members. At St Saviour’s there is a strong commitment to Christian Education and this has been the case for many years. Examples from St Saviour’s are used in the chapter to illustrate key features mentioned. The chapter seeks to outline consistent and comprehensive patterns for the future.

## **A Learning Congregation Focus – The Now**

From the mid 1990’s there has been the gradual recognition that the study of the theory and practice of Christian Education has to involve an initial discussion of parishes as learning communities before looking at particular programmes, courses or approaches, that is, looking at the whole before selecting the parts.<sup>5</sup> From the “Learning Community” perspective 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.

The learning community approach helps each congregation identify educational ministry for the whole congregation. Christian Education seen in the context of the congregation as a learning community has four key aspects as indicated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Four Aspects of Christian Education:**



In the learning community four people-centred aspects appear for consideration: the individual, the group, the congregation as a whole, and the general society where Christians 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.

### **Individual**

Much individual Christian learning happens informally through relationships, friendships, caring conversations, listening to one another's stories, participation in church, family and work-life and informal interest based networks, as well as personal initiatives, such as Bible reading and devotions. Pastoral Care and counselling conversations build people's faith and help develop a personal sense of closeness to God. Being in nature, experiencing music and other life experiences are very important for growth in faith – reading a book, viewing a film, looking at a piece of art, attending a lecture/seminar, using a website, participating in a Worship Service.

Individual Christian Education also happens more formally by being a member of a group or involved in Family Faith Formation processes or undergoing training in a particular aspect of ministry.

For example, in recent years at St Saviour's four young adults have been licensed to be Lay Assistants at the Holy Communion Service. Each person was prepared by practice, study of the biblical origins and meaning of the Eucharist, reflection and prayer. There was a discussion on the significance of assisting in the giving of Holy Communion, by

administering the chalice to other members of the congregation. The person leading the preparation was a coach. Lay Assisting is a practice or activity within the Anglican Church Community that is ongoing, involves certain attitudes and skills, and brings a sense of the presence of God.

## **Groups**

In 2005 St Saviour's provides Christian Education programmes to encourage spiritual growth for adults, young people, children and families; including involvement in small groups, use of "Seasons of the Spirit" Bible based resources connecting worship, learning and service for all ages, and equipping members with faith sharing skills.<sup>6</sup> Children's Ministry as Sunday School happens on Sunday mornings in association with 10am Worship Service.

In the 2005 Adult Parish Lenten programme at St Saviour's, a range of opportunities was 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).

An adult commented that although she was a 'knowing' learner herself, she was surprised to think that learning through 'being' and 'doing' were equally valid approaches. For example one learns through prayer, and one learns through the practical tasks of preparing the Church for Sunday worship, for example flower arranging. She was intrigued by the idea that the whole life of the congregation teaches.

Many resources are available for group use. Christian Education through group activities for discussion and study is often seen as the main, if not the only, means of Christian learning for adults within a congregation.

Much energy has gone into preparing worthwhile programmes like Education for Ministry, Alpha, Credo, Cursillo, Lenten Studies, courses at S. Barnabas Theological College, Adelaide College of Divinity, Catechumenate and Liturgy Planning processes. Small groups are an essential part of parish ministry. Many leaders are equipped through such approaches and many are helped to live a Christian life. Education in Christian

Practices is also readily available within the life of a congregation, including adult Bible study material for small groups.

The Anglican Diocese of Adelaide has a “Resource Centre” containing many Christian Education materials for perusal. The Diocesan Ministry Development Council administers this Centre. A St. Saviour’s parish library was established in the 1990’s.

## **The Congregation**

Cultivating congregational learning is a more recent arrival on the Christian Education scene in the Anglican Church in Australia. Parish Consultations have been held for many years with an outside consultant enabling a congregation to move towards future directions. What is newer is when leaders of learning congregations deliberately help to create opportunities where the whole people of God can gather and reshape the meaning of life and the parish way of life in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Leadership in the parish becomes increasingly an educative task.

In September 1998 a Special Community Week of Teaching and Activities with a keynote speaker was held in the Anglican Parish of Glen Osmond. The theme for the week was “Christianity ... Next Millennium”. There was a high level of involvement where at least 220 members of the Parish Community participated. Preparations for the week began three months beforehand and 190 people took part in three discussions using locally prepared leaflets for each discussion topic. Usually in the Parish about 60 people regularly participate in Lenten discussions and belong to small groups. On the Parish roll in 1998 there were 350 family units with an average attendance per Sunday of 150 persons. The Special Week approach certainly reached more people. This is an example of Christian Education for all, rather than for the few which is often the case. Parish Missions are occasions when many more people participate. Stewardship programmes are also part of the educational experience of a parish community.

***Action-Based Learning*** is part of Parish life. When a Parish Refugee Support Group was formed in the Parish of Glen Osmond a few years ago parishioners underwent a process of learning. This included researching the need, discussing the biblical and theological rationale for assisting refugees, deciding the way in which this Christian Community could realistically help, and then there was and still is the work of ministry and relating personally to refugee families. Participants were enriched and experienced the mutual love and hospitality as expressed in Hebrews 13:1-2. What happened in the Bible happened to them!

Action-based learning is an example of the experiential learning cycle – do, look, think, plan and act anew.

### ***Discerning and deciding our future***

Often congregations are involved in making major decisions for the future, like closing the Church Buildings in one part of the Parish or deciding how to use the bequest of a house for local mission purposes. On such occasions there is much research, prayer, biblical and theological reflection, looking at options before deciding and then implementing the outcomes. People grow in their faith and maturity in Christ in the process of making these decisions and in being supported by a worshipping, caring, learning and serving Christian community.

Another example will illustrate the approach to Congregational learning. During 2003 St Saviour's Anglican Church Community, 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".<sup>7</sup> 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. Equipping local parish priests and parish leaders in the ways of congregational learning will be an ongoing task for the Church.

### **General Society**

Promoting and enabling Lay Ministry is an essential task for a congregation. Encouraging every church member in their ministry and use of their abilities is a core part of parish life. Encouraging disciples in their ministry and mission includes not only when people gather on Sundays but also when they scatter to the many areas of their lives during the week, at work, in the family and the community.

Being a member of Parish Council or a Lay Assistant/Lay Reader/Preacher or convening one of the Parish Groups is an important part of lay ministry; so is seeking to relate faith to

decisions in the family, at work and to social issues. Equipping disciples for these forms of ministry and mission is a priority. Archbishop William Temple wrote about this in his book *Christianity and the Social Order*, and I quote ‘Nine-tenths of the work of the Church in the world is done by Christian people fulfilling responsibilities and performing tasks ...’<sup>8</sup>.

Encouraging laity to connect Sunday and weekdays in an everyday spirituality is an ongoing commitment.

The work-based ministry of ITIM (Inter Church Trade and Industrial Mission) Australia and St Paul’s City Ministry/Ethics Services in South Australia is to be commended. A Parish based faith/work discussion group is very beneficial for faith development and practising faith sharing skills. Christian Education in a learning community “includes not only the people gathered in Church on Sunday, but all the arenas of their daily lives all week long”.<sup>9</sup>

Educating the members of the general public in the matters of the Christian faith is also part of a congregation’s responsibility. Pro-active use of advertising and the media tell the good news stories and invite participation in particular events. St Saviour’s parish website helps in this task.<sup>10</sup> The Parish supports Chaplains in local, state primary and secondary schools, as well as the Chaplain of the Waite Campus of the University of Adelaide.

Christian Seminars in High Schools and Christian teaching programmes in primary schools are organised by local Chaplains. School Chaplains, Hospital Chaplains, Police Chaplains and Industrial Chaplains all assist. Offering theological and meditation courses on the internet and in public forums invites interest. The Christian Television advertisements seek to advance an understanding of the Christian faith. The role of Church Schools in teaching the Christian Way and the role of Religious Education in Schools in teaching an understanding of religion is important when examining Christian Education in general society.

## **Approaches to Christian Education**

The learning community functions as individuals, groups, congregation or general society. There are many windows of access to Christian Education in local Christian communities. Christian Education has a number of different approaches.<sup>11</sup> Some focus on the faith community, mission issues, teaching or growth and the nurture of the spiritual life. Christian educators seek to keep all these approaches in mind. Having a balanced understanding of the different approaches helps educators cater for a diversity of people and contexts, as well as the breadth and depth of Christian teaching, summarised in Jesus’ two great commandments to love God and our neighbours as ourselves. (Luke 10:25-28) <sup>12</sup>



## Conclusion

In the course of this chapter I have travelled from the past to the present. The big picture scenario for Christian Education has been built up to be inclusive of all members and many aspects of the church. As Christian Education belongs to the whole church community, so in the future, hopefully, many more creative ways will be developed to enable disciples to grow in their faith.

*John Littleton*

## End Notes

1. See Parish Website [www.stsavioursngo.net](http://www.stsavioursngo.net)
2. Blackwood and Walton (1932) *Our Greatest Asset*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney p. ix
3. Merritt D. (1984) *Towards Renewal of the Church – The Urgent Task of Christian Education*, Victorian Council of Christian Education, Melbourne p.15
4. Emmett and Endacott (2004) *On Thin Ice*, Uniting Education
5. See for background a series of seven articles I have written on *Being a Learning Community in the Parish – Recognising How it is and Seeing What it Could Become*". Littleton 2003-2004, available [www.stsavioursngo.net](http://www.stsavioursngo.net) and [www.unitinged.org.au](http://www.unitinged.org.au) Article 6. *A Congregation Learning* will be of immediate interest. Some material from these articles has been used in this chapter.
6. See Website [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com)
7. Report from the Wardens (February 2004) to the Annual Vestry Meeting, St. Saviour's Anglican Church, Glen Osmond, Adelaide.
8. Temple W. (1942) *Christianity and the Social Order*, Penguin p.27
9. Everist N.C. (2002) *The Church as Learning Community – a Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, U.S.A. p10.
10. [www.stsavioursngo.net](http://www.stsavioursngo.net)
11. Littleton J (2003) *Approaches to Christian Education* article 4, [www.stsavioursngo.net](http://www.stsavioursngo.net)
12. Biblical and theological reflection is central to the process of Christian Education as examples in this chapter illustrate.