

Enhanced Faith Learning in Parishes

John Littleton, March 2016

In this thesis I argue that the learning community processes—of holism, collaboration and theological reflection—when intentionally practised in parishes, enhance learning outcomes in terms of the knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith.

Two research questions guide the narrative of the thesis: firstly, is there evidence that parishes within the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, South Australia, used learning community processes and, secondly, is there evidence that these learning processes, when used, enhanced faith learning outcomes in these parishes?

Using a mixed-methods research design, I investigated the enhancement of faith learning within the parishes of the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. Parishes were surveyed during the year 2013. Forty-seven (47) of the 61 parishes responded to Survey One, while 45 parishes responded to Survey Two. Focus groups were conducted in six of those parishes during the year 2014; one focus group in each of the six parishes.

The research showed that a positive association existed between the enhancement of learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith and the use of holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes. Parish survey results revealed a spectrum of responses from across parishes in the Diocese. Parishes with multiple learning community processes reported much growth in faith learning outcomes. Parishes at the other end of the spectrum with fewer learning community processes reported some or little growth in faith learning outcomes.

To express it another way, the information from the research data revealed a definite tendency. Parishes which had a high ranking in terms of the learning community processes reported very much or much growth and enhancement in faith learning, while parishes that had a low ranking in terms of learning community processes reported some or little growth in faith learning.

Faith learning, as defined in this thesis, is a process of growing in the knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith in and through Jesus Christ.

Learning community processes have been widely used in other educational contexts, in schools and higher education. Research conducted in those contexts showed the positive impact of those learning processes on learning outcomes. The eight evidence-based research findings in this research project show that the three learning community processes used in the church context had a positive impact on learning outcomes in parishes. These findings on parish learning contribute in return to the general learning community literature.

This study of parish educational ministry through the lens of a learning-community approach provides a template from which to gauge future directions in

parish learning. The study shows that a learning-community approach in parishes is an effective means to enhance learning outcomes and to foster much growth in the Christian faith. Six strategic attitudes in parish ministry practice help to foster this growth in the faith. Enhanced faith learning outcomes in parishes become an achievable goal.

As demonstrated in this thesis, a moderate, positive and clear association existed between the learning community processes and faith learning outcomes in the parish contexts investigated for this research project.