

The overall title:

**BEING A LEARNING COMMUNITY  
IN THE PARISH-**

**Recognising how it is and seeing  
what it could become.**

The five topics are:

- 1. Christian Education belongs to the whole Church.**
- 2. Many Windows of Access to Christian Education in Local Christian Communities.**
- 3. Moments of Learning from God.**
- 4. Approaches to Christian Education.**
- 5. Helping Christian Education Flourish in Congregations.**

By the **Rev'd John Littleton**

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**Article 1.**

**CHRISTIAN EDUCATION BELONGS TO THE WHOLE CHURCH<sup>1</sup>**

**Reclaiming Christian Education for congregations, local Christian communities and parishes.**

Rev'd John Littleton

**Who is the educational ministry of the Church for?**

In recent months I have been concerned about a trend in Christian Education which very rightly encourages individuals and groups to be involved in particular educational activities. Much energy has gone into preparing worthwhile programmes like Education for Ministry, Alpha, Credo, Cursillo, Lenten Studies, courses at St. Barnabas Theological College, Adelaide College of Divinity, Catechumenate and Ministry Certificates (GBRE). 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. I too, have written Bible study material for small groups to use.

As a Christian educator I am concerned when I note that, in general, in Anglican parishes the majority of parishioners do not participate in the above type educational activities. I'm told that even in Dioceses where there is, very properly, much

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<sup>1</sup> The idea for this title came from the World Council of Churches Newsletter of the Education and Ecumenical Formation Team, subtitled "*Christian Education belongs....to the whole church*".

emphasis placed on "Becoming a Ministering Community", not all the parishioners are involved, mainly those offering leadership.<sup>2</sup> "Has it not always been so?" some may say! "Need it be like this?", I respond. Christian Education is for everyone. A desirable outcome would be to involve all (nearly all!) parishioners in Christian Education, not only those already participating in small groups, annual Lenten studies or other worthwhile educational activities.

**Christian Learning is grounded in local settings.**

In the Diocese of Adelaide, with its emphasis on strengthening local Christian communities, should we not be looking towards more approaches that develop a congregation's strategies for an effective teaching ministry with all members? Adult learning research indicates that all adults have some learning project on the go at any one time. How could a Parish tap into this aspect of human aspiration and encourage many more people in a spiritual growth project?

If the front line mission of the Church is located in the local Christian communities: if local Christian communities like parishes and schools are the cutting edge of the Church's ministry and mission, the *local* is where most people are available as disciples for ongoing learning opportunities. Larger events held centrally or regionally are very stimulating and helpful for those who attend, as was the case with the recent Provincial Conference held in Tanunda. Yet most parishioners in the Diocese of Adelaide did not attend. Leaders may have

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<sup>2</sup> Eg. The Anglican Diocese of Willochra, South Australia.

attended and there will be a spin-off effect as they report back and show renewed enthusiasm. What about the rest of the disciples involved at the local level?

Every member of the Church, as a disciple, belonging to the People of God, the Body of Christ, is entitled to be stimulated in life-long learning. Disciple means learner. Most expect this to happen where they are in the local arena of involvement as well as elsewhere, at work or in the regional, Diocesan or National, even international arenas.

#### **Identifying practical, local options for Christian Learning.**

Let me suggest some other approaches which help reclaim Christian Education for the whole Church in the local arena. An exciting challenge is to encourage discussion and growth in faith and commitment for all disciples.

**The Sunday experience** has always been of great importance. The significance of the worship and learning which occurs should not be underestimated especially where there is a clear quality theme focus for the Worship Service, which has resulted from creative liturgy planning. Worship and learning styles should not be limited to use of “A Prayer Book for Australia”. For young people new initiatives are being developed and on Sunday evening too.

**The importance of creating a learning community in the local Church** must be emphasised. An atmosphere of open discussion on matters of faith and life (and Church structures!) and an emphasis on special events and special times creates a

Christian Education strategy for all ages.<sup>3</sup> An annual set of topics discussed in public meetings is one approach: topics like Christianity and other Faiths, Christianity and Science, Christianity and Worship, Faith and Work, and Spirituality Today. Parish consultations combine significant learning with the involvement of many parishioners. Parish library resources also assist.

**Parish Missions** are occasions when many more people can participate.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the conducting of missions is due for a comeback, though in a variety of forms appropriate for the twenty-first century. **For example:** in September, 1998 a Special Community Week of Teaching and Activities was held in the Anglican Parish of Glen Osmond, Adelaide.<sup>5</sup> The theme for the week was “Christianity...next millennium”. There was a high level of involvement; at least 220 members of the Parish Community participated. There was a keynote speaker. 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 this Parish about 60 people regularly participate in Lenten discussions and belong to small groups. On the Parish roll there are 350 family units. Average attendance per Sunday is 150 persons. The Special Week approach certainly reached more people.

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<sup>3</sup> *Helping Your Church Teach* by David Merrit, JBCE Books 1998, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> *Planning a Church Mission* by Paul Weston CPAS 1993- one possible approach.

<sup>5</sup> Article on *The Community Week*, September 1998

**Sunday worship, the learning community and parish missions** are three well-tested ways to involve many more disciples in Christian Education (other ways may also be suggested). I have written this article in order to counter the trend I described in paragraph one, and to offer some suggestions as a corrective so that Christian Education might become available to the whole Church, not only to the few who are prepared to join particular groupings. These suggestions might lead to a new trend! And besides, those involved in a Parish mission, for example, might choose to join a small group. Those belonging to small groups might be enriched by a special week of teaching.

We could perhaps describe these two trends as Christian Education for the few and Christian Education for all. Joining these two trends together in the life of the Church would create a more balanced situation and reclaim Christian Education for *all* members of a congregation. Christian Education belongs to the whole Church.

**John Littleton**

**June 1999, revised May 2003.**

**Article 2.**

**MANY WINDOWS OF ACCESS TO CHRISTIAN  
EDUCATION  
in local Christian Communities .**

Rev'd John Littleton

Many windows not one. Christian Education for many means courses of learning over a period of time when the participants grow in their faith and ministry. Education in faith for some involves formal groups. But for others there is Christian Education on the run. Christian Education happens amongst everything else that happens. This kind of learning in Christ is less formal but relevant, flexible, relational, intentional, and sustained, and receives less attention or acknowledgment in Church life. My Parish experience and reading on Christian Education would suggest that there are many windows of access to Christian Education not only through the valuable courses, studies, resources and small groups so readily available.

In the New Testament there are many examples of formal and informal learning times. (St. Mark 8: 27-29 where Jesus asks questions; also St. Luke 10;38-42 Jesus, Martha and Mary; St. Luke 10:25-37 The parable of the Good Samaritan; St. Luke 24:13-35 The Walk to Emmaus.)

**Action Learning**

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- being enriched and experiencing Hebrews 13:1-2. What happened in the Bible happens to us!

**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. Relating Faith and work is another discussion topic which helps parishioners connect their Christian faith to the ethical decisions made on the run each day of the week at work. As members of the Church recognize that each member, each disciple, is a minister and missionary, so each may seek ways of equipping themselves for ministry through appropriate learning opportunities. Involvement in restructuring a number of parishes into a regional co-operating parish would be another example. Tackling any of the issues facing the direction of the

Church in the future does promote growth in faith and ministry-managing unity in diversity, building team ministry, modern music and worship, the variety of spiritualities in a congregation...

### **A “Smorgasbord” of multiple options**

*Rethinking Christian Education*, Explorations in Theory and Practice (ed.) D, Schuller was published in 1993. This book consists of chapters by leading thinkers in Christian Education about the implications for churches of Search Institute’s national study in U.S.A. on “Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations”. Sara Little wrote the Chapter on “Rethinking Adult Education”.<sup>6</sup> In that chapter she looks to the future by making the following suggestions:

- Adults may learn as much from knowing-in-action as from formal study.
- Consideration of a variety of settings is essential to comprehensive planning for adult Christian Education. The congregation is the primary context but use of other contexts is to be encouraged- conference and retreat centres, theological colleges.
- The metaphor of “spider web” may be more appropriate than “stair steps” for planning education. (‘smorgasbord’ some suggest )
- Self-directed learning or distance education or computer programmes may present future possibilities (websites!)

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<sup>6</sup> Schuller ed (1993), *Rethinking Christian Education* , Chalice Press:USA,p99.

- Adult Education cannot further faith maturity unless it is undertaken in the context of some unifying purpose, cause or mission.

### **Five critical factors**

Sara Little’s statement about the total context of learning had already been fully outlined in the first chapter of the book. The research showed that effective formal Christian Education was best developed where other factors within the congregation also had a formative influence on nurturing faith. The following five factors were found to be most powerful: a warm and friendly climate ( an atmosphere of hospitality and acceptance ); a thinking climate where members felt challenged to think, where questions were encouraged and learning expected; the quality of the worship services ; members receiving care ; service to others- congregations who see service to others as a natural and necessary expression of their faith do a better job of nurturing faith in their members. Giving consideration to the National Church Life Survey in Australia and its publication of the “Ten things that make a difference”<sup>7</sup> to vital and growing congregations, would also emphasise the importance of the total context of learning.

Rethinking Christian Education in the twenty- first century must include an increased recognition of the more informal kinds of Christian Education.

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<sup>7</sup> Kaldor et al (ed) 1999, *Build My Church*, Openbook Publishers, South Australia,p73.

Recent research conducted by Uniting Education in Australia supports the trend towards a broader understanding of Christian Education.

### **What contributes to growth?**

*Making Disciples*- a survey of Christian Education in U.C.A. congregations by Philip Hughes and John Emmett was published 2000. This extensive, significant research into what is happening in the life of U.C.A. congregations in Australia has some interesting findings. Sources that have contributed most to Faith Development are listed as follows:

#### ***“Worship.***

Services of worship are widely affirmed as making a substantial contribution to faith development. Around 30% of attenders say they have contributed a lot, and another 50% say they have contributed to some extent.

#### ***Other Sources.***

However, there are three other major contributors which are almost equally important as services of worship.

- *Relationships* with other people: the members of the church, home and family and special friends who have helped to nurture faith. Interestingly, relationships with clergy and elders are not so frequently reported as helpful. People feel that they learn through their interaction with their peers, through the sharing of personal stories, through experiencing friendship.

- *Being in Nature.* As many people reported that ‘being in nature’ has contributed a lot to the development of their faith as reported that services of worship had. Being in nature contributes strongly to people feeling a sense of peace and well-being. Through it people find meaning.
- *Personal experiences,* for young people in particular, awareness of God’s spirit, and the experience of music are very important in growth in faith.

Group activities, Bible study, reading Christian books, the seasons of the Christian year, serving others, leading worship, and voluntary work are well down the list in terms of their contribution to the development of faith, with around 10 to 15% saying they have contributed a lot, and 40% saying they have contributed to some extent.

Further down the list again are courses of study, activities in the wider church, paid employment, workshops and seminars, films, lectures, art displays and group meditation. In these areas, less than 10% said they had contributed much and less than 20% said they had contributed little.”<sup>8</sup>

### **The importance of relationships**

In addition the research report indicates that attenders learn through relationships- special close friendships, listening to one another’s stories, general participation in church life, informal interest based networks- whereas clergy put more emphasis on

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<sup>8</sup> Hughes and Emmett,(2000),*Making Disciples*, Uniting Education,p11.

training people and had a more cognitive and content orientation towards Christian Education. To quote:

“This research identifies the centre of faith for most lay people as a personal sense of the closeness with God. For most people, the key to living the Christian life is having a relationship with God through which one gains a sense of peace and inner security. That relationship is enhanced by supportive human relationships and special friendships. It is nurtured as people share their stories with each other and as they worship together.”<sup>9</sup>

This research tells it how it is in The Uniting Church in Australia and indicates some future directions. A more informal approach to Christian Education needs to be accepted.

### **Forming people in Christian practices**

Anglicans have traditionally emphasised the importance of the sacraments and Pastoral Services- marriage, funerals, ministry with the sick and dying, and reconciliation of a penitent. Understanding the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and the Church practices has usually been part of Confirmation Preparation. However, a recently published book written by Craig Dykstra throws fresh light on education and Christian practices. His book called *Growing in the Life of Faith- Education and Christian Practices* draws our attention again to the powerful way in which Christian Practices reveal the Divine presence, the mystery of God. For Dykstra “

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p17

education in faith presupposes and depends on people’s experience of the Mystery of God” in Christian Communities. Education in faith is through participation in Christian practices which experience brings a sense of God’s presence and a desire to learn more and grow. Each practice is a means of grace, a sacrament, not so much a task to accomplish or an instruction to follow.

Dykstra lists fourteen (14) ordinary practices that appear consistently throughout the tradition and that are particularly significant for Christians today.<sup>10</sup> This list of practices includes: worshipping God together, interpreting the scriptures together, praying together, confessing our sin and being forgiven, participating in acts of service, providing hospitality and care, and working for justice. We do not have to establish these practices because they exist in Church life anyhow ready for planned and systematic education in Christian practices- the learning, the practice, the repeated participation and reflection. This education in faith is itself a means of grace. Christian Practices fundamental to the Christian way of life form character and morality. Participation promotes learning by doing and that includes mission. Dykstra argues “ that the practices of the life of faith have power to place us where we can receive a sense of the presence of God, especially when multiple practices are engaged in relation to one another”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dykstra C.(1999)*Growing in the Life of Faith*, Geneva Press,pxii, p 42-43

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p63

### **Being deliberate is essential**

Craig Dykstra's book reminded me that Christian Education opportunities are readily available, on our doorsteps daily, and easily accessible if only we are aware and intentional. New groups or activities or committees do not always need to be formed. The challenge is to reflect on what is happening already and go deep as a Christian Community; growing in faith through relationships, decision-making, action-based learning and participation in Christian Practices. Effective Christian Education occurs through small groups and courses. Other less formalized types of Christian Education are also effective and a reality, and could be alive and well in our Parishes. Admit it. Enjoy. Grow to maturity in Christ.

To concentrate on a view of Christian Education which emphasizes small groups, courses and workshops at the expense of a view which promotes a many-sided perspective, is a lopsided approach; it is only half the story! To appreciate that there are many windows of access to Christian Education, that "Christian Education is integral to all ministries" and that "all the practices of Christian faith have an educative role"<sup>12</sup> is to bring a balance back into the debate.

### **Careful choice facilitates growth**

Even when there is a more balanced view of Christian Education there is still the question of focus. If education is in all things where is the focus to be? The focus moves from

programmes and courses to creating many more possibilities of learning. The 'Many windows of access' approach develops expectations and an awareness of a broad understanding so that when an occasion arises a leader or leaders will have a readiness to grasp the opportunity and will be better prepared and equipped to assist persons and communities to grow in the life of the Christian faith. Otherwise opportunities may be missed! There are many opportunities for sustained growth in faith and ministry. This attitude of mind changes one's understanding of what constitutes Christian Education or Formation in the parish. It looks different. It broadens the range of possibilities of learning in Christ and helps create a learning community in the local Church.

**John Littleton      May 2001, revised May 2003.**

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<sup>12</sup> *Creating the Future through Learning* – a Conference Reader (October 2000), article 21 by John Emmett, p3., Uniting Education.

**Article 3.**

**MOMENTS OF LEARNING FROM GOD**

Rev'd John Littleton

The intent of this article is to shine a spotlight on special moments in people's lives and to focus on the role of the Christian Educator in relation to those special times.

At an Adelaide Anglican Christian Education Forum ( June 2001) there was a discussion, about an article of mine titled “ Many Windows of Access to Christian Education in Local Christian Communities”. In that discussion members of the group identified that from time to time there are moments of learning for individuals and congregations. Such moments can be named as moments of learning from God. Such occasions do, upon reflection, reveal God's gracious presence and love. Such moments upon reflection (theological reflection and/or spiritual discernment) become moments of learning from God the source of life and our being, God , who is the Ground of our Being.

One example of such a moment mentioned at the Forum was the perceived need at this time to re-examine the interior of our churches in the light of the contemporary spirituality and understanding of mission. So, at the next Forum meeting in October we discussed the book *Re-Pitching the Tent - reordering the church building for worship and*

*mission* by Richard Giles <sup>13</sup>. An appendix in this book outlines a six week crash course on the design of liturgical space. One Parish had recently completed this course to great benefit. This topic became part of our conversation because it was seen as a God-given moment on which to capitalise in order to facilitate growth in Christian faith and life.

**Listening to and telling stories of faith**

For individuals too, there are times of change when new possibilities emerge in life which can become learning moments from God. Listening in conversation to the stories people tell about their experiences of God's sacred presence provides an interesting and diverse list of such moments; moments which occurred in the lives of some members of the Glen Osmond Anglican Parish Community. Conversation often helps express what we see with the eyes of faith, revealing the divine presence in daily life; in the wonders of nature, in music, in communion, in the healing ministry, in knowing people of integrity, in family life, and in a concern for justice and assisting the needy. In my own life there have been the experiences of falling in love and getting married, the call to ordination and being ordained priest, having children and eventually getting to know them in their adulthood as friends. Then there are those moving moments in worship services, and the exciting new insights gained from reading or film or play or orchestral concert or conversation.

**Hearing from Scripture and Tradition**

In the Bible too there are many accounts of moments of learning from God for individuals. Some of these moments were very

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<sup>13</sup> Giles R. (1999), *Repitching the Tent*, Canterbury Press.

significant for the continuing story of the Community of Faith. Think of those encounters with God experienced by Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Mary, Jesus, Peter and Paul, and the effect these “theophanies” had on the history of God’s people. A “theophany” is a manifestation or appearance of God to a human-being, and such experiences continue to this day in our everyday lives. Bruce Wilson in his book *Reasons of the Heart* explores this theme of contemporary theophanies.<sup>14</sup> Those who have an interest in angels (messengers of God) see much evidence for moments of learning from God in the biblical text. The effect on Joseph of an angel of the Lord appearing in a dream was of great significance in saving Jesus from Herod ( St Matthew 2:13-15). On St Peter’s Day this year I was reminded that Peter experienced moments of learning from God in new insights, naming Jesus as the Messiah (St Matthew 16:16) and then opening the door of God’s kingdom to the Gentiles after experiencing God’s presence in prayer (Acts 10), later on influencing the decision-making of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 11) to accept Gentiles into the Christian Community.

A number of other writers have influenced my thinking on this theme. Recognising these significant moments in life and acting on them is what life is about. T.S. Eliot in his poem *Four Quartets* sees “ history as a pattern of timeless moments”(Little Gidding IV).<sup>15</sup> In this poem T.S.Eliot explores a timeless moment in a secluded chapel at Little Gidding, England. Moments of learning from God happen on various occasions in various ways and can be

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson B. (1998) *Reasons of the Heart*, Allen and Unwin, Chapter one.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot T.S. *Four Quartets*,Faber and Faber ,p49,p58.

compared to a sacrament if the idea of “the sacrament of the present moment” is developed. This idea was very well developed in 1773 by French Jesuit priest Jean-Pierre de Caussade. In conferences on the spiritual life he shared the simple yet profound reality of his own experience that “ God speaks to every individual through what happens to them moment by moment”. His teachings have been published in the book *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* <sup>16</sup>.

### **Recognising Godly encounters in sacramental experience**

Sacraments are outward and visible signs with an inward and spiritual grace or meaning. Moments of learning from God become sacraments in revealing God’s gracious presence, peace , love and blessing. The main sacraments of the church include key aspects of life-birth, communion, confession, healing, marriage commitment and vocation. The sacraments of the present moment help us to see signs of God in ordinary life, as another French priest Michel Quoist shows in his book *Prayers of Life*.<sup>17</sup> Quoist writes that all life would become a sign of God’s presence and love “ if we knew how to look at life through God’s eyes”<sup>18</sup>.In his prayers the ordinary things of life reveal God’s presence: The Telephone, A Brick, A Blackboard, A Swing, A Funeral, The Sea, A Five Pound Note, A Tractor... The Australian Bruce Prewer in his book of prayers *Jesus our Future* <sup>19</sup> includes everyday topics. Michael

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<sup>16</sup> DeCaussade.J (1981) *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, translated by Kitty Muggeridge, Harper Collins, pxiii.

<sup>17</sup> Quoist M. (1964) *Prayers of Life*, Gill &Son,Dublin.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p14.

<sup>19</sup> Prewer B. (1998) *Jesus our Future* , Open Book.

Leunig, another Australian in his books of prayers takes up everyday themes too.<sup>20</sup> A 2002 Lenten meditation I led on the sacrament of the present moment was well received in the Parish.

### **Nurture Godly moments**

Moments of learning from God in the big and small aspects of life are integral to the Christian life and experience for individuals and communities of faith. A major task for Christian Educators is to nurture these moments; to engender a sense of expectation that there will be such moments and to encourage reflection and action based upon such moments. For from such moments comes the motivation to discover more of God and to grow in God's way. These experiences will help decide the appropriate learning approaches. These experiences will help describe the learning opportunities required to further growth and ministry. Christian Educators can assist by offering ways and means forward to explore the topic with individuals and in groups in order to facilitate growth in the Christian faith and life. People themselves will decide the programmes to be developed. The Educator will be alongside enabling the processes, rather than offering the courses and programmes which have already been developed elsewhere from other people's needs and which may or may not be suitable for everyone. This is an inductive rather than a deductive approach. The approaches needed cannot be programmed beforehand; rather leaders will, in advance be formed and equipped with the skills to respond appropriately and spontaneously at the time. Moments of learning from God give the motivation and decide the learning needed.

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<sup>20</sup> Leunig M.(1990) *A Common Prayer*, Collins Dove.

### **Creating 'hospitable space'**

For this to happen it seems that there is a need for "hospitable space". Last year I participated in a Christian Education Conference in Melbourne, organised by Uniting Education, where I was introduced to the term "hospitable space" in the context of congregational life – the need for an hospitable climate or culture which helps people to be open to moments of learning from God and grow to maturity of faith. Hospitable space in a congregation or family life includes the values of trust, care, respect, compassion, kindness, love and forgiveness as in the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Hospitable space is where there is respect for God and for persons.

Jack Seymour and Donald Miller wrote in the book *Mapping Christian Education- approaches to Congregational Learning* that "Religious learning occurs in hospitable, just and open spaces for conversation and truth telling"<sup>21</sup>. An atmosphere of trust and genuine conversation enables depth and honesty in any conversation. Those who have experienced best practice small group work, counselling, supervision, consultancy, spiritual direction and meditation will appreciate this need for hospitable space and recognise its benefit.

The role of Christian Education is to nurture people's moments of learning from God and assist in that by creating hospitable spaces

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<sup>21</sup> Seymour & Miller ed. (1997) *Mapping Christian Education*, Abingdon Press,p126.

in congregational life. To develop these two competencies and to equip leaders to achieve these two outcomes will be a continuing challenge for Christian Educators in 2002 and beyond.

This prayer was inspired by a moment of learning from God:

Lord God, the Source of life, love and being,

The Ground of our Being,

Thank you for Jesus, who is the way

And shows your truth, your life, your love and your Being.

Amen

**John Littleton November 2002, revised May 2003.**

**Article 4.**

**APPROACHES TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**

Rev'd John Littleton

Members of a local Anglican congregation would know that there are a variety of approaches to Christian Education in the congregation and in the Diocese –Lenten Studies, Small Groups, the Sermon, various courses and studies for adults, young people and children (Sunday School maybe). Most people may not notice that there is more to it than that. There are quite different approaches present, some more developed than others, all depending on people's experience of the living God in Christian Community. Experience and the literature on Christian Education suggest that there are at least FOUR main approaches.

**Four emerging broad directions**

One way into the topic is to revisit Jack Seymour's book *Mapping Christian Education-approaches to Congregational learning*<sup>22</sup>. For a number of years there has been a pluralism in Christian Education. As Sarah Little wrote " There has been no one clue, no dominant theory"<sup>23</sup>. Now, however, four directions seem to have emerged more clearly. Seymour maps these four approaches.<sup>24</sup>

1. TRANSFORMATION explores social transformation and has to do with God's Kingdom of justice and love, God's mission.

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<sup>22</sup> Editor J Seymour, Abingdon Press 1997

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. page 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pages 18-21.

Congregations teach as they engage people in social justice issues; refugee support for example.

2. FAITH COMMUNITY provides the content and process of Christian Education. We learn the faith as we participate in the faith community, its worship and life.

3. SPIRITUAL GROWTH examines the personal dimension of learning, spiritual formation of persons in community under God through Jesus Christ, practising the presence of God, nurturing people's moments of learning from God; meditation.

4. RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION describes formal instruction in the Christian Faith, formal processes of theological reflection, intentional learning and teaching; Bible studies.

**Discovering the preferences of congregations**

Members of an Adelaide Anglican Christian Education Forum met in June 2002 having used an assessment process based on these approaches.<sup>25</sup>The results of my assessment showed a clear priority for spiritual growth, then religious instruction was followed by faith community and transformation. The group result (5 people) also revealed a clear priority for spiritual growth. In the discussion which followed this analysis of the assessment process members agreed, that in order to honour the Australian experience it would be appropriate to rename the approaches as follows: mission, faith community/worship, spiritual growth/nurture and intentional learning/teaching. We also suggested that

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 90. At an Anglican Diocesan Southern Deanery Clergy meeting in Adelaide during May 2003 four more people completed an assessment process. The result indicated a priority for spiritual growth. A wider survey is needed.

spirituality is the basic experience which drives or motivates the other approaches.

### **Spirituality and Spiritual Growth – a new priority**

This emphasis on spiritual growth/nurture represents quite a change in focus for Christian Education. In the Australian Anglican scene during the last twenty-five years or so much time and energy has been put into intentional learning/teaching<sup>26</sup> and faith community/worship approaches.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless all four approaches may be present to some degree in each congregation. Recognising these approaches will assist in acknowledging the variety of approaches as well as admitting that Christian education occurs in different ways. Those who focus on Bible Studies (4) for example may now recognise that assisting refugees (1) is also learning in the faith. All congregations educate and in a variety of ways. Being aware of those ways may be helpful in understanding the congregation as a learning community.

### **An Australian view**

*Five Ways People Approach Christian Education* is the title of an article written in 2002 by Philip Hughes from The Christian Research Association, Melbourne. The article is based on Australian research. Philip Hughes distinguishes these five approaches:

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<sup>26</sup> eg. Education for Ministry Programme and the Christian Formation Programme (GBRE)

<sup>27</sup> eg. The very worthwhile approaches encouraged by John Westerhoff III (USA) and Leslie Francis (UK) in their books and on their visits from overseas lecturing in Australia, organised by GBRE (Australian National Anglican General Board of Religious Education). GBRE went out of existence in June 2002; the EFM and Conference projects went to two Dioceses.

1. ***Learning the Christian Heritage*** involves passing on the Christian tradition the heritage of the faith by Bible stories, doctrines and values.
2. ***Strengthening the Organisation*** includes Christian Education which trains people for leadership roles and making a contribution to the smooth functioning of the Church organisation; and the ministry of the whole people of God is encouraged. (Sections one and two fit into Seymour's fourth category)
3. ***Sharing Community Life*** helps people grow in their faith through relationships, weekly worship, fellowship and conversation, listening to one another's stories and relating faith and life at Church, in the family and with individuals; the sharing of life experiences in a supportive faith community.
4. ***Social Transformation*** is about justice in society, teaching people about injustices and mobilising action groups.
5. ***Nurture of the spirit*** has a high priority in the research data gathered. People feel that the spiritual life is important.<sup>28</sup>

Hughes says that "the desire to nurture the spiritual life is often eclipsed by the functions of living, by families and home-making, friends and work. It is sometimes pushed into the background by the many possibilities, of having a good time, by entertainment and parties, by sport and holidays. Yet, people do want a sense of meaning and the spiritual is seen as contributing to that. The ways in which they are seeking to find meaning and a sense of peace and well-being are many. They find such meaning in relationships within the family and in their work. Many find it in being in nature and through music."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hughes(2002), *Five Ways People Approach Christian Education*,p1-5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p4.

### Thinking about the future practices of Christian Education

Hughes concludes his article with a section on *Christian Education in Future*<sup>30</sup>. He makes a strong case for more emphasis on nurturing the spiritual life. He suggests that in nurturing the spiritual life Christian Education must be packaged in a way which makes it available in a variety of forms to the whole community, and not only offered mainly within Church structures. Such Christian Education must engage people through the questions they are asking and in a variety of ways, for example, through festival and art, through education and groups, worship and meditation, through drama and music.

This trend in Christian Education towards spiritual growth/nurture certainly needs to be noted and acted upon by Christian Educators. A positive presentation of the great tradition of Christian spirituality, meditation and prayer is a necessary focus. But, at the same time it is also important to look towards a balance by keeping in mind the four approaches. Having a balance helps educators cater for a diversity of people and the breadth and depth of Christian teaching as summarised in Jesus' two great commandments to love God and our neighbours as ourselves.

Best Practice Christian Education might suggest that these four approaches be kept in mind when considering Parish and Diocesan learning opportunities and when choosing Christian Education resources. For example, the new "Seasons of the Spirit" Bible based Christian Education resource connecting worship,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p5.

learning and service provides for the four approaches in positive and creative ways.<sup>31</sup>

The future for Christian Education is full of possibilities. There are at least four dominant approaches available. Keeping true to all four may be a challenge. But, undergirding all Christian Education is the nurturing of the relationship with God's sacred presence in Christ. Growing the spiritual life may well provide even more of a challenge. Growing the spiritual life will need to be an ongoing commitment in order to ensure depth and provide a "final criterion"<sup>32</sup> for evaluating any approach to Christian Education.

**John Littleton    January 2003, revised May 2003**

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<sup>31</sup> See website [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com)

<sup>32</sup> These two words *final criterion* fit the intent of this article very well and come from the book *Mapping Christian Education* (ed) J. Seymour, Abingdon Press, p107. At the time of writing that book in 1997 Jack Seymour was Academic Dean and Professor of Religious Education at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, USA. He is also co-editor of the book *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education*, Abingdon Press 1982.

Article 5.

**HELPING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION FLOURISH  
IN CONGREGATIONS**

Rev'd John Littleton

Best practice Christian Education flourishes within congregations where a vision and clearly stated directions are vigorously pursued. The importance of the total context of learning in a congregation cannot be over-stated when giving consideration to the effectiveness of various approaches to Christian Education.<sup>33</sup> Research and my experience, backed by reading, show that effective Christian Education develops best when other factors within the congregation also have a formative influence in nurturing faith. Eight factors are of most influence in making for quality growth in faith. There may be others. Together these factors help develop the congregation as a learning community.

The eight factors are:

- A sense of vision and direction in the Gospel: total context
- A warm and friendly atmosphere
- A thinking climate
- Quality Worship experiences; prayer
- Members receiving care
- Outward looking focus
- Leadership style
- A consistent culture.

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<sup>33</sup> Refer Littleton J. (2003) *Approaches to Christian Education*.

I have drawn on four main sources for this article:

1. Search Institute's National Study (1990) in USA on *Effective Christian Education: a National Study of Protestant Congregations*, as written about in the book *Rethinking Christian Education - Explorations in theory and practice* Ed. D.S. Schuller.<sup>34</sup>
2. The Australian National Church Life Survey Publications called *Build My Church – trends and possibilities for Australian Churches*, based on the 1996 survey, and *Connections for Life-Core qualities to foster in your Church* based on the 2000 NCLS survey.<sup>35</sup>
3. An article by John Emmett (National Director Uniting Education, Uniting Church of Australia) entitled *What will make a Difference to growing people in the life of the Christian faith?*<sup>36</sup>
4. St Saviour's Anglican Church's *Vision and Direction statement* 2002, Glen Osmond, Adelaide.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Schuller D. ed (1993) *Rethinking Christian Education*, Chalice Press.

<sup>35</sup> Kaldor P. et al., *Build My Church*, Openbook Publishers 1999, and *Connections for Life*, Openbook Publishers, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Emmett J. (2000) *What will make a difference to growing people in the life of Christian Faith?* Uniting Education, Collingwood, Melbourne.

<sup>37</sup> See website: [www.stsavioursgo.net](http://www.stsavioursgo.net)

### **A sense of vision and direction in the gospel: total context**

This is the overarching factor which helps Christian Education flourish in congregations. The other seven factors follow on. In the book *Rethinking Christian Education* in a chapter called “Rethinking Adult Education”, Sara Little wrote, “Adult Education cannot further faith maturity unless it is undertaken in the context of some unifying purpose, cause or mission”.<sup>38</sup> Such a statement also applies to all ages in the congregation. The Search Institute’s research results indicated that in addition to formal Christian Education other factors within the congregation also have a formative influence on nurturing faith. “When these factors are in place, they augment and reinforce the quality of the Christian Education program. When they are not in place, their absence can negate the impact of education. These factors were found to be most powerful: warmth, thinking climate, the quality of worship, receiving care and service of others”.<sup>39</sup>

This USA research indicates that the total congregational context is important for the formal Christian Education to be fully effective. My experience and reading would suggest that this conclusion can be broadened to include all approaches to Christian Education. The Australian National Church Life Survey research results describe the total context, but do not highlight ‘growth in faith’ education in relation to other characteristics or core qualities. NCLS research basically states that all characteristics are interconnected to make a whole and

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<sup>38</sup> Schuller D. ed. *Rethinking Christian Education* , p.109

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* pp. 13-14

all together help to create vital and growing congregations. NCLS research does however highlight the factor of vision and purpose.” *Build My Church* suggests “having a sense of vision or direction is statistically the most important of the (ten) key characteristics”.<sup>40</sup> *Connections for Life* states that “understanding and owning a vision and purpose as a church is central to growing virtually all the other (three) core qualities discussed in this book”.<sup>41</sup>

### **A warm and friendly atmosphere**

is fundamental to a positive Christian Education ministry. The USA Research states “that congregations found to be strongest in developing mature faith were characterised by an atmosphere of hospitality and acceptance...Members perceived their congregation to be warm and friendly...People felt welcomed”.<sup>42</sup> John Emmett writes that “warm climate churches are intentional about teaching and equipping attenders with behavioural patterns that sustain a warm climate...gospel behaviours are part of the discipleship agenda of the Church. ...helping attenders develop strong interpersonal skills.”<sup>43</sup> To be a welcoming Parish Community which encourages friendship, fellowship and a sense of belonging and acceptance, is an important aspect of a learning community.

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<sup>40</sup> Kaldor P. et al . *Build My Church*, p.86

<sup>41</sup> Kaldor P. et al., *Connections for Life*, p.71

<sup>42</sup> Schuller D. ed. *Rethinking Christian Education*. p.14

<sup>43</sup> Emmett J. *What will make a difference to growing people in the life of Christian faith?* p3.

### **A thinking climate**

is “ where members feel challenged to think, where questions are encouraged and learning expected” to quote D. Schuller.<sup>44</sup> “Employ critical thinking” writes John Emmett, “the gospels are full of stories about critical thinking”.<sup>45</sup> Conversation, discussion, growth in faith and commitment are interconnected and encouraged in this kind of environment in a congregation.

### **Quality worship experiences**

assist learning . The Sunday experience of worship, learning and prayer should not be underestimated especially where there is a clear theme focus resulting from creative liturgy planning based on the Bible readings for the day.

### **Members receiving care.**

In the Search Institute’s reports it is stated that “Maturity of faith was found in congregations where people expressed a sense of receiving care and concern from others”<sup>46</sup>. Being a caring Parish Community for all ages and stages involves pastoral care networks and visiting.<sup>47</sup> “ Educate through

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<sup>44</sup> Schuller D. ed. *Rethinking Christian Education* , p14 .

<sup>45</sup> Emmett J. *What will make a difference to growing people in the life of Christian Faith?* p8.

<sup>46</sup> Schuller D. ed. *Rethinking Christian Education* , p14.

<sup>47</sup> See website [www.stsavioursgo.net](http://www.stsavioursgo.net)

relationships,” writes John Emmett “ Christian Education is a social ministry, thriving on relationships”.<sup>48</sup>

### **Outward looking focus**

Service to others. David Schuller writes that “Congregations who see service to others as a natural and necessary expression of their faith do a better job of nurturing faith in their members”.<sup>49</sup> Outreach activity enables a Parish to focus on those beyond Church life and help those in need in the local community and beyond, nurturing ecumenical links and making connections between faith and daily life.<sup>50</sup> Action-based learning can be part of Parish life as in the work of a Refugee Support Group.

### **Leadership style**

The USA study found that teachers involved in formal Christian Education, who were mature in their faith, cared for their students and knew educational theory and practice, and that Christian Education was most effective where Pastors were highly committed to the educational programme, devoted significant time to it and knew about educational theory and practice.<sup>51</sup> In my experience, Christian Education is enhanced when Bishop, Clergy and Parish leaders practise a shared and enabling leadership style. This was pointed out to me again at

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<sup>48</sup> Emmett J. *What will make a difference to growing people in the life of Christian Faith?* p5.

<sup>49</sup> Schuller D. ed *Rethinking Christian Education*, p14.

<sup>50</sup> See [www.stsavioursgo.net](http://www.stsavioursgo.net)

<sup>51</sup> Schuller D. ed. *Rethinking Christian Education* , p11.

an Anglican Diocesan Southern Deanery Lay Forum meeting in Adelaide during February 2002. Group members indicated that the “one man band” clergy set up had long gone past its best-use-by date and that such an authoritarian leadership style can stifle learning in a congregation. The way leaders behave can have a positive or negative influence on the forming of a learning community. When a team of clergy and lay members work in shared ministry with Parish leaders, small group leaders and parishioners then there is a better chance of best practice Christian Education happening. Learning is greatly facilitated when the leader is able to adapt the educational approach to different contexts-to a small or large congregation or in a multi-cultural context.

#### **A consistent culture .**

I have added this section because the issue of Christian Education and culture is of ultimate importance. The influence of a *hidden curriculum* or culture, has the capacity to support or undermine the overt gospel teaching and learning objectives of a congregation. Learning objectives are indicated in the formal education program. Learning objectives are also implied – or carried – in seven other factors that influence quality growth in faith.

Where the formal teaching and the congregational culture match then the gospel learning is greatly enhanced. Where the congregational cultural values contradict the overt Christian teaching of the two commandments - love of God and neighbour as yourself, for example, and as a result the Church fails to practise what it preaches - then the Gospel is not

presented authentically. Where the formal teaching and the culture are consistent, then the gospel is the more powerfully communicated.

In recent years there has been a loss of credibility of the Church, not least through revelations of sexual abuse by some clergy and lay leaders in congregations. The culture of the Anglican Church of Australia is discussed by Caroline Miley in her book *The Suicidal Church*<sup>52</sup>. She examines the current failings of the church from her perspective and outlines its culture of timidity, fear, racism, sexism and homophobia. Others, like David Tacey in his book *ReEnchantment – The New Australian Spirituality*<sup>53</sup> observe that the organised religion of the church is patriarchal and masculinist. Leaders in congregations these days need to have the ability to creatively manage cultural change as part of the educational process towards a culture more consistent with Christ’s teaching and practice, a more Christ-like culture.

This topic emphasises the possible impact of the wider Church and society upon the life of the congregational learning community. In any case ,it is important to help build high morale and upward spiral thinking in the Body of Christ based on a positive Gospel message and the strengths of the congregation and the wider Church, rather than let low morale and downward spiral thinking develop as a result of negativity based on any weaknesses in the local or wider church and

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<sup>52</sup> Miley C. (2002) *The Suicidal Church*, Pluto Press.

<sup>53</sup> Tacey D. (2000) *ReEnchantment-The new Australian Spirituality*, HarperCollins, pp229,232.

society. Declining statistics in the Diocese could be seen as one example of a weakness, and lack of unity between the Churches might be another. What is happening in the Diocese for example can be of influence in a congregation. A positive or negative influence needs to be discussed and placed in a Gospel perspective. The morale of a congregation has an impact on learning in the faith. Tackling issues positively, handling differences or conflict sensitively, and managing change creatively, encourage a Christian learning community to grow a consistent culture.

No longer can Christian Education be undertaken as a separate ministry in a the congregation without consciously connecting the approaches to Christian Education with the total context of learning and other factors in congregational life as outlined in this article; especially noting the overall sense of vision and direction in the Gospel. May the congregation as a learning community go from strength to strength in the years ahead.

**John Littleton    April 2003, revised May 2003.**