

Paper

Ecumenical Learning and Learning Communities

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The paper has three aims. It introduces the work of Simon Oxley on the connection between ecumenical learning and learning communities. It focuses on the findings of an Australian research project about the enhancement of faith learning in Anglican parishes through the use of a learning community approach. It discusses those research findings in relation to the enhancement of ecumenical learning through the practice of receptive ecumenism in parish and local contexts.

Ecumenical Learning

In *Creative Ecumenical Education*, Simon Oxley identified the connection between ecumenical learning and a learning community approach. He wanted to help churches become learning communities. Oxley discussed educational processes that facilitated ecumenical learning: encounter with the “other”, multiple perspectives, critical thinking and communal learning. He wrote that to take ecumenical education seriously “we must work to help churches become learning communities rather than domesticating communities – to have a abroad or multiple perspective rather than a single, narrow view of their faith and the world” (Oxley 2002, 44).

For Oxley “Ecumenical education is as much about the local communities, congregations, churches and movements learning as it is about the individual members learning.” “In ecumenical education our values are shaped by those of Jesus and embodied in his expression of the kingdom of God” (Oxley 2002,145).

One definition of ecumenical learning published by the World Council of Churches is:

Learning which enables people, while remaining rooted in one tradition of the church, to become open and responsive to the richness and perspective of other churches, so that they become more active in seeking unity, openness and collaboration between churches (Oxley 2002, 12).

Learning Community Approach in Parishes researched

Such learning processes relate to the findings of my doctoral research study (2013-2014) on the enhancement of learning in 47 parishes within the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. This research examined parish educational ministry through the lens of a learning community approach. A learning community in the parish context is defined as:

a visionary community of faith where leaders and members, while respecting a diversity of abilities and perspectives, practise holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes (Littleton 2017,13).

In that study, 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 in and through Jesus Christ.

Parish survey and focus group results revealed a spectrum of responses from across the parishes in the Diocese. The research showed a moderate, positive and clear association between learning processes and learning outcomes.

Learning community processes are holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective.

Holistic processes are present where there is a shared vision of the whole parish. The shared vision for the whole parish combines the five parts of parish learning available in an Anglican parish structure: individual learning; group learning; congregational learning; community engagement learning; and dialogical learning. The degree of holism depends upon the extent to which the five parts of parish learning figure in the profile of parish life.

Collaborative processes in parishes involve people in the sharing of leadership within the ministry and outreach responsibilities of the parish, when members work and learn together interactively, enjoying and respecting the abilities and contributions of others in achieving a common task. The degree to which learning processes are collaborative depends on the widespread sharing of leadership and the regular use of teamwork, the gifts and skills of parishioners, and the extent of consultation and networking.

Theologically reflective processes in parishes involve people in reflecting upon or thinking about their present life actions in the light of the biblical story and traditions, and then moving forward, renewed for future. The degree to which learning processes are reflective is indicated by the extent to which the leadership, the sermons, the worship services, the parish groups, the decision-making of the parish and the membership show evidence of some form of theological reflection.

The concept of a parish or congregation as a learning community is not mainly that of a community that learns around particular content. It is a community that has special learning processes (holistic, collaborative and reflective) and ways of undertaking that learning (on whatever topic). Process is just as important as content. The learning community processes apply to the practice of receptive ecumenism.

Disciples learn. Learning is a change in attitude and behaviour by a person or group of people. As defined for the research project “Faith learning is a process of growing in the knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith in and through Jesus Christ. By growth in faith learning, I mean the degree to which people report that their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith have grown or been enhanced; that individuals and groups report a change in their acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills in terms of the Christian faith” (Littleton 2017, 49).

The research findings indicated a definite trend. “The general trend across the spectrum of parishes indicated that the greater the presence of these learning community processes in a parish, the greater the likelihood that there would be much growth and enhancement in faith learning, with a lesser presence of these processes tending to correlate with less growth and enhancement in faith learning” (Littleton

2017, 68).

Learning through conversation and participation was highlighted in the research project. “In parishes with enhanced faith learning, research participants reported that they learnt through conversation, participation in teams and in the sharing of ministry tasks” (Littleton 2017, 72). Research findings demonstrated the importance of learning from the doing of ministry and mission with others. The focus group findings confirmed these survey findings and placed an emphasis upon collaborative and interactive faith learning (Littleton 2017, 91).

Such findings reflected a shift in educational learning theory. “From the mid-1980s, there was a fundamental shift in learning theory from a traditional transmission of knowledge view to a more social and conversational understanding of learning. There was a movement away from an “acquisition” metaphor towards a “participation” metaphor. Learning in this new paradigm was seen, not so much as communication or transmission of ideas to students, but as an active and reflective process of meaning making with others in the culture of a community. Learning happened as people thought about and did activities together” (Littleton 2017, 28).

These findings relate to the enhancement of ecumenical learning in the parish and local context. Much growth in ecumenical learning is a likely outcome when holistic, collaborative and theological reflective learning processes are used in the practice of receptive ecumenism. Learning through conversation and participation enhance ecumenical learning.

The Practice of Receptive Ecumenism in the local context

Paul Murray states that Receptive Ecumenism provides an appropriate organising principle for contemporary ecumenism. “This is the principle that considerable further progress is indeed possible, but only if each of the traditions, both singly and jointly, make a clear, programmatic shift from prioritising the question “What do our various others first need to learn from us?” to asking instead, “What is that we need to learn and can learn, or receive, with integrity from our others?” (Murray 2014, 91) The question for the practice of receptive ecumenism is, *what can we – and what do we need to – learn and receive, with integrity, from the other traditions?* (SACC 2014, 1)

Six practical examples illustrate local receptive ecumenism activity in Adelaide, South Australia: a lecture, a pilgrimage, a fishbowl technique, a workshop, an ecumenical conversation and recognition of learning through feedback. Three criteria (holism, collaboration and reflection) influenced the choice of appropriate methods.

In Adelaide, for a number of years from 2008, the South Australian Council of Churches Committee for Ecumenical Learning organized an *annual lecture* on an ecumenical theme using a participatory approach. Two responders who had prior access to the text of the lecture followed on from the lecture presentation (20-30 minutes) by the guest speaker. Each responder spoke for about 5-10 minutes. Then, all participants discussed the topic for about 10 minutes in small groups of 3-5 people. Questions or comments to the guest speaker and others concluded the 90-minute

session. By the end of this process the 60-80 people present became a community of learning.

In April 2017, members celebrated the 70th Birthday of the South Australian Council of Churches (SACC) under the Theme: *An Exchange of Gifts on the Journey towards Unity*; in the city of Adelaide, Saturday, 10am-3.30pm, over 100 people participating. The organisers had invited the communities of four city churches – Pilgrim (Uniting), St Francis Xavier (Roman Catholic), St Mary Magdalene’s (Anglican) and St Stephen’s (Lutheran) – to host a *pilgrimage* to enable the SACC General Council members and people from across the churches to gather and celebrate these seventy years. This Pilgrimage experience of walking, conversing, eating, reading the Bible and worshipping together was impressive, positive and inspirationally grounded in the Presence of Christ evident amongst the participants and in all the Churches visited.

In July 2017, the SACC held an event in a parish entitled *Exchange of Gifts: Reimagining our Unity in Christ through Receptive Ecumenism*, using a *fishbowl technique*. The interactive conversation amongst the 21 participants from a wide variety of churches focused on the learning question: How does your Church welcome newcomers, nurture hospitality and nourish an active congregation? Four responders (from the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Uniting Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church) opened the conversation by sharing what they had learned about the learning question from listening to answers that people from other churches gave prior to the event. Other participants then entered the conversation, which gradually moved through information and content learning towards deep ecumenical learning on hospitality, welcoming and growing an active congregation, with the potential to draw a part of their own church more fully into the way of Christ.

Other practical resources are available in the booklet *Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands*. A *workshop* format on “Receiving the Gift of the Other” is included in that booklet (SACC 2014, 4).

In 2016, members of the Ecumenical Network for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide decided to change the format of their gatherings. Instead of a meeting format an *ecumenical conversation* is now held based on a presentation and a shared reflection on the topic (minimal note taking on necessary business). In conclusion a personal or group reflection is held in response to these questions: What have I learned? What will I do differently? Are there any steps I can take within my sphere of influence... someone to speak to... some action to undertake?

Self-reporting is an effective form of *feedback* (Littleton 2017, 74-75, 79-81).

The following questions may be useful.

How am I going with my ecumenical learning as a result of reading this paper?

Over the last year do you believe that you personally have grown in your ecumenical learning? (in terms of your knowledge or understanding or application or all three aspects)

Tick a response below.

- No growth
- Little growth
- Some growth
- Much growth
- Very much growth

Describe your thoughts and feelings in relation to your response. Give an example.

Have a conversation with someone about your thinking (a friend, a family member, a teacher, a parish, leader, clergy...).

Conclusion

The paper focused on the connection between ecumenical learning and a learning community approach researched. Examples of events from the practice of receptive ecumenism in parish and local contexts were outlined. The intentional use of learning community processes and feedback enhance ecumenical learning.

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References

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