A Core Characteristics Parish-Based Learning Community: What is it? How does it work in practice? What are the implications?

By John Littleton 20/5/20

Abstract

The article makes the case for the importance, the recognition and the beneficial use of a core characteristics learning community model in the twenty-first century parish context. This learning community model is derived from Christian education, general education, reflection on the biblical image of the 'body of Christ' in an Australian Adelaide Anglican context, and by reference to Jesus the Teacher and the early church as a learning community. This learning community model is affirmed and strengthened by evidence-based research findings and from the development of a learning community methodology with implications for the theory and practice of Christian education in congregations.

Keywords: Learning community; Christian education; parish; learning processes; learning outcomes.

Introduction

The article investigates the learning processes identified in the core characteristics of parish-based learning communities and asks what they look like today and how they work effectively; and to do that by being in conversation with several currents of thought: (1) current literature on the core characteristics model of a learning community, (2) current thinking on the early church as a learning community, and (3) the current understanding of Receptive Ecumenism.

The article follows on from my earlier paper "Enhanced learning in the parish context: a learning community approach" published in *Practical Theology* 11, 4 (2018), 320-333. That paper defined and described the core characteristics of a learning community, reported on a research project, which used those characteristics as its framework, and presented the findings.

For the purpose of that research project, a learning community approach, customised for a parish context, was 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, 13-17).

The core characteristics learning community approach (CCLCA) is identified by learning processes that are holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective (Littleton 2018a, 322-323). The word parish often used in this article also refers to a congregation or a faith community.

Background

The core characteristics learning community approach (CCLCA) in parishes confirmed my own experience in and writing about ministry in Anglican parishes and builds on the thinking and writing of others (Seymour 1993; Hawkins 1997; Campbell 2000; Aron 2000, 2002; Everist 2002; Oxley 2002; Regan 2003; Collinson 2004; Fleischer 2004, 2006; Groome 2011; Saines 2015; Shapiro 2017; Mitchell 2018). This learning community approach has been customised to the Anglican parish context in Adelaide (Littleton, 2016: 19).

Four factors influenced the choice of CCLCA: (1) A community of faith model of Christian education; (2) learning communities in the broader field of education; (3) the affinity with the biblical image of the 'body of Christ'; and (4) understanding the early church as a learning community.

A community of faith model

A community of faith understanding of a congregation is that the whole life of the parish is the focus for education in the Christian faith. An educational component exists in every aspect of a parish's life. An educational ministry for the whole parish is developed. Authors have articulated this approach for many years, emphasising the formative power of the congregation (Nelson 1971; Westerhoff 1976, 1979; Merritt 1984; Dykstra 1987; Prevost 1997; Aron, 2002; Everist, 2002; Fleischer 2004; Littleton, 2008; Roberto 2010; Groome 2011). The core characteristics model for a learning community in an Adelaide Anglican parish context keeps the community of faith model as its central focus and draws on other approaches to complement and illuminate aspects of the educational focus based on the whole life of the parish community. It integrates congregational, biblical and educational dimensions (Littleton 2018a, 321).

Notion of a learning community in general education

The decision to use a core characteristics model for learning communities was also influenced by notions of learning communities used in general education contexts, namely schools and universities. Until my research project, as Craig Mitchell noted, the "more recent notions of learning communities from the broader field of education have had relatively little influence" on Christian educators (Mitchell 2018, 67). Research conducted in schools and higher education showed evidence of the positive impact of core learning community processes on the learning outcomes of students, their achievement and involvement as well as improved outcomes for teachers and educational institutions (Shapiro and Levine 1999; Kilpatrick, Barrett and Jones, 2003, 6; Cox 2009; Owen 2015; Dinham 2016, 199-215).

The common features or core characteristics of learning communities in general education include: people with common values and purpose; collaboration and reflection; participation by all involved; a focus on learning; an inclusive and holistic approach; and the enhancement of learning towards new knowledge. Those common features also apply to a congregation or parish and are consistent with the work of Isa Aron and Craig Mitchell who also identified core characteristics of learning communities (Aron 2002, 9-10; Littleton 2018a, 322).

The core characteristics model aligns with the work of Craig Mitchell on congregations. Mitchell interviewed leaders from thirteen Uniting Church learning community congregations throughout Australia. He described learning communities "as a learning culture that is both collective and individual, a group actively exploring a shared interest or passion, and a community working intentionally on how best to learn" (Mitchell 2018, 146). He identified key categories or characteristics of learning communities in congregations, including participation, relationship-building, inclusivity, conversation, dialogue, intergenerational, adaptive learning, action-reflection, prayer, worship and "leadership cultures of openness, trust and permission-giving" (Mitchell 2019, 102, 147, 308, 314). He explored "how community generates learning and how learning generates community" (Mitchell 2018, 146-147, 307-308).

The biblical image of the 'body of Christ

Third, a core characteristics model has an affinity with the biblical image of the "body of Christ," a key image for a learning community perspective in parishes. The idea of the church as the "body of Christ" is expressed in 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:1-8; Colossians 1:18; and Ephesians 4:1-16. Study of the "body of Christ" metaphor provided five principles that described ministry practice in the church and that helped shape the definition of the learning community used here. Derived from this metaphor church ministry is to be holistic, interdependent, inclusive, Christ-centred and Spirit-guided (Littleton, 2017: 35-43).

The affinity between these five principles and the core features of a learning community became a key factor in deciding to adopt the approach. Distilling these aspects into three main characteristics – holism, collaboration and theological reflection –provided a clear focus for the model. The "body of Christ" vision underpins the learning community approach with a biblical foundation, inspiring confidence that such an approach has both a biblical and an educational base; the holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective processes are indigenous to life within Anglican parishes. The core characteristics model fits well with the structures and practical realities of Anglican parishes in Adelaide (Littleton 2016, 91-93; 2017, 62-63).

The early church as a learning community

Fourth, the argument for supporting a CCLCA is affirmed and strengthened by reference to the early church as a learning community (Littleton 2019). The effective learning processes found in use from the time of Jesus to the formation of the Jesus movement onwards into the educational history of the first four centuries of the church provide evidence for the claim that the early church was learning community. The use of holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes was evident in the early church, especially the emphasis placed on theological reflection. Theological reflection (TR) was central in the ministry of Jesus, and a key learning process reported in the Gospels. Our theological reflection processes today derive from Jesus and the early church.

A study of the Gospel accounts of Jesus the Teacher through the lens of a learning community perspective revealed, in contemporary terms, and albeit anachronistically, that Jesus was a facilitator of learning, one who used holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes (Littleton 2014, 2-12). Jesus was, in twenty-first century educational language, an inclusive teacher, relating to all kinds of people in a range of different venues and situations. He taught in collaborative ways, used interactive teaching

style and facilitated learning for and from ministry practice. Action/reflection, collaboration and close personal relationships were central in the ministry of Jesus. Action and reflection processes were evident in the Gospels, where disciples observed Jesus's ministry, exercised their ministry collaboratively, then reflected and reported back on their experiences (Collinson 2004, 100-101, 122-133,164). Jesus was a practitioner of theological reflection (TR) as illustrated in his many parables and elsewhere (Seymour 2014, 55-61, 141-143, 165; Heywood 2017, 25-30; Littleton 2017, 9-10, 55-56). In using parables Jesus invited disciples and others to think about the story and the meaning for themselves.

Frances Young explored educational processes of the early church: formation, personal growth and "corporate pilgrimage" (Young 1996, 229). The life of the early church assembly was holistic and educative, inclusive of many learning processes based on the scriptures and the importance of the individual growing in Christ (Acts 2, 42-47; Judge 1966, 32-44; Burtchaell 1992, 287; Young 1996, 239; Knight 2008, 41; Perkins 2012, 123-125).)

The educative and learning community process emphasis is highlighted by the work of E.A. Judge and Claire Smith in their writing the first century Pauline communities. E.A Judge (Judge 1960, 1960-1961, 8-9; Schloer 2008, 117-118) used the term "scholastic community" to described the educational activity of these churches; a kind of adult education; "the individual's growth towards a full development "in Christ" " (Judge 1966, 35, 41). Building on Judge's work, Smith examined the place and practice of educational activities in three early Christian communities and concluded that these communities could be best described as "learning communities" (Smith 2012, 1, 61, 390-393). The adjective "learning" acknowledged that members of such communities all learnt from God.

Theologically reflective processes were evident in the life of the early faith communities. For example, in *The Letter to the Colossians*, as discussed by Vicky Balabanski, we witness Epaphras reflecting theologically. Upheld by Paul, Epaphras, a significant leader and educator with the Christians in the Lycus Valley helped people express their faith in Christ in the light of the Jesus tradition and the background of Stoic philosophy (Balabanski 2020, 45, 46, 53, 60, 65, 105, 161, 170). That reflection led to a cosmic vision of Christ, the high Christology articulated in Colossians; that "in Christ all things hold together and all things are reconciled" (Col. 1.17, 20). Colossians also provides an example of shared theological reflection (Littleton 2020). As Balabanski argued the authorship of Colossians was collaborative, a circular letter written by Timothy with Paul, from Rome, in prison c. 62 CE (Balabanski 2020, 7, 9, 11, 156, 163; Col.1.1,7-8, 4.12-13), in consultation with Epaphras.

Theologically reflective learning processes used in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke are described, for example, through the work of John Falcone, Michael Trainor and Thomas Groome (Trainor 1992, 94-95, 2012; Groome 1980,122-123, 135-137; Falcone 2016 1, 12, 15). Trainor outlined, in contemporary terms, and "albeit anachronistically", the main features of Luke's theological reflection process in four dimensions: "the situating, remembering, transforming and actuating dimensions". These dimensions, Trainor wrote "form the heart of a contemporary educational or theological praxis drawn out of a first century Christian community" (Trainor 1992, 94-95).

An educative and learning process emphasis is further highlighted in the development of the catechumenate in the early church during the second to fourth centuries. Young's work provided a general overview of the Church's adaptation of the classical notion of *paideia* (education) as a full rounded individual and community educational learning process based

on scripture, liturgy and leading towards character formation in Christ. Her thesis was that "The church was a lifelong, 'comprehensive', learning community" (Young 1996, 230, 237, 240).

From those centuries we have a variety of examples of the catechumenate to study (Harmless 1995, 79-381; Young 1996, 230-237; Littleton 2019, 8-10). Theological reflection was also evident in the use of the image of *Mater Ecclesia* as described by Methodius in *The Symposium,* written c. 270-290 CE. Reflection on the image of motherhood led educators to use nurturing and caring educational behaviours to help congregations form new Christians (Musurillo 1958, 3-5, 10-11, 65-67, 111-116; Cranswick 1976, 63-64, 223). Through the catechumenal stages the chief role of the Christian community was to be "reproductive," to be continuously making Christians (Cranswick 1976, 1, 90-93, 154, 225-227); giving people from a different worldview a chance to turn towards and learn a new way of living life in Christ through the catechumenal processes (Westerhoff and Edwards 1981, 76, 312; Elias 2002, 23).

The early church was, albeit anachronistically, a learning community effective in growing disciples (Young 1996; Collinson 2004; Smith 2012). The twenty-first century church can draw strength from the recognition of the early church as a learning community and be encouraged to recognise and renew the learning community perspective in parishes today.

Customisation

The principle of customisation is highlighted in the learning community literature. The learning community concept has been customised and defined for various contexts. Patrick Hill stated that "The concept of learning communities is not a rigid one: there are a great variety of ways in which learning communities can be conceived. The successful ones are all adaptations to the peculiar context of this or that institution" (Hill 1985). The principle of customisation applies to the parish context as much as it does to the other situations and other centuries.

Contextual issues

In a discussion on the CCLCA, a key issue is the matter of contextualisation, the adopting or adapting methods from other learning contexts.

Just as Christian educators from the 1970's (Westerhoff 1976, 1979; Seymour 1982) moved away from the schooling model towards a community of faith model for Christian education in parishes so, today, Christian educators need to keep closely aligned with the community of faith model and maintain the view that the whole life of a congregation offers times and places in which Christian learning may occur. This means that Christian educators are cautious when considering other contextual models; not completely adopting an approach from another context, whether it be a university, a school, or a business.

Rather, each context has its own indigenous parameters, structures and approaches that are integral to its circumstances. Parishes from different denominations may have varying ecclesial structures that influence the shape of their learning community approach. Some approaches in one context may assist the approach in another context. However, all approaches have the core characteristics as they are best, and appropriately and perhaps

differently, applied. A learning community framework can indeed draw on aspects of the other frameworks and there may be overlap between them.

For example, the team learning discipline from Senge's learning organisation framework can easily be used in a group learning aspect of parish life, especially the life of a parish council or a ministry team (Littleton 2010, 19-20). The work of Senge (Senge 1990) highlighted five core disciplines for building a learning organization in a business context: personal mastery; mental models; shared vision; team learning; and systems thinking. Even though Senge used many corporate business examples to make his case, a number of authors considered that the five disciplines provided a potential approach to educational ministry dynamics in parishes and used the helpful term "learning congregation" (Hawkins, 1997; Campbell, 2000; Regan, 2003; Fleischer 2004, 2006). However, a parish is not just a business. Rather, a parish is a faith community which aims to be business-like. Senge's model does not have a strong outreach aspect as required for a parish community engagement context. Nevertheless, a Senge model for a learning community provides many insights for a parish context.

Another issue raised from the use of the CCLCA is the matter of meaning. Often teachers and leaders consider that, when parishioners are studying a topic and learning, they are a learning community, when, in effect they may be a community of learners. Isa Aron made the distinction between a learning community and a community of learners (Aron 2000, 2002). Sometimes those who use the term learning community attach the term to content. A learning community, as previously indicated, consists of core characteristics and is not limited to content. It has to do with core learning processes which enhance the knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith. Process is as important as content. The concept of a parish or congregation as a learning community is not mainly that of a community around specific content. It is a community that has specific learning processes as ways of undertaking that learning, on whatever topic, discipleship or mission. Excellence in a learning community parish has to do with the learning processes as much as learning content (Aron 2000, 2002; Littleton 2017, 17-18). The church is a learning church as well as a teaching church (Rosenthal and Currie 1997, 108; Board of Education, UK 2000).

Current research on learning communities in the parish context

As part of the investigation into the value of the CCLCA a conversation with current research literature focuses on the learning outcomes and benefits of the approach.

An abundance of evidence-based research exists on learning communities in the school and higher education contexts. Learning communities impacted positively on learning outcomes in those contexts. In contrast, while some literature is available on the theory and practice of learning communities in the parish context, examples of empirical research conducted on the parish as a learning community are scarce (Fleischer 2006; Littleton 2016; Saines 2015; Mitchell 2018; Otero & Cottrell 2019). The CCLCA was used for the first time as a research framework on learning outcomes in Adelaide Anglican parishes in my research project, 2013-2014. The findings from that research identified trends and patterns.

The findings demonstrated that a learning community approach enhanced faith learning in parishes. Research participants in parish learning community environments reported very

much growth in their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith when the learning community processes were intentionally and fully used. Parish survey and focus group (six focus groups) findings showed a spectrum of responses from across the 29 parishes surveyed. The general trend across the spectrum of parishes indicated that the greater the presence of the learning community processes in a parish, the greater the likelihood that much growth and enhancement in faith learning would be reported, with a lesser presence of these processes tending to correlate with less growth and enhancement in faith learning. (Littleton 2017, 18). Parishes with multiple learning community characteristics reported a high degree of growth and enhancement in faith learning and vice versa. More detailed research findings are readily available (Littleton 2017, 2018a).

Three specific findings show how the research benefits Christian education in parishes by revealing future directions.

(1) Findings on the holistic processes, especially the research results on dialogical learning;
(2) Findings reported on the total parish learning outcomes and individual learning outcomes;
(3) Findings on making learning visible in parishes.

Holistic learning processes

The empirical research results indicated that parishes need to be aware that it is the pattern of all three learning processes, namely, holistic, collaborative and theological reflection processes, which delivered positive faith learning outcomes as reported by parishioners. The lesser presence of holistic learning processes contributed most to parishes reporting less growth in faith; holistic learning processes needed more attention and development, particularly the holism indicator of dialogical learning (Littleton 2016,115-119; 2017, 95-97).

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

The holism characteristic emerged as a learning edge for parishes that reported little faith learning. Tackling the learning processes of holism would then be a practical place to start initiating an innovative activity. More specifically the findings focused on dialogical learning: that dialogical learning was not done well in the parishes, which reported less growth in faith. To enhance faith learning outcomes, leaders facilitate respectful conversation across different viewpoints.

Dialogical learning occurs within the diversity of parish life, through navigating differences with active listening and learning from dialogue about different viewpoints. Fostering conversation across differences through discussion and reflection in the name of Christ can lead to further faith learning.

The research project revealed a significant finding in relation to dialogical learning. Research Survey One included a statement on dialogical learning. Question 9 in Survey One asked about whether leaders organised occasions when members met to learn about different viewpoints in the parish and to discuss them through respectful conversation. While, in 62% of the parishes surveyed, the research participants reported the occurrence of respectful conversations about different viewpoints, the dialogical learning aspect received the lowest percentage result for the *strongly agreed* response to Question 9. When all those responses are compared the results are: a 7% strongly agreed response on dialogical learning; an 18% strongly agreed response for individuals learning faith through conversation; a 24% strongly agreed response for community engagement learning; a 23% strongly agreed response for congregational learning; a 27% strongly agreed response in relation to individual learning; a 48% strongly agreed response that parishioners learn Christian faith during Worship Services. Considering the importance that respondents placed upon other aspects of faith learning, more leaders in parishes may need to nurture respectful conversation about different viewpoints.

Parish and individual learning

The research survey data showed that when a parish reported 'very much' or 'much' growth in faith learning outcomes, the individuals in that parish also reported 'very much' or 'much' growth and enhancement in faith learning outcomes and vice versa. That is, when a parish reported to have 'some' or 'little' growth in faith learning outcomes, the individuals in that parish also reported 'some' or 'little' faith learning outcomes. Analysis of the focus group learning outcomes supported this trend. A connection existed between individual reports of much growth in faith learning outcomes and reports that their parish had much growth in faith learning outcomes. There was a tendency for individual growth in faith to be high when the parish growth in faith was reported to be high. To enhance individual learning outcomes, leaders develop the processes that foster parish learning (Littleton 2016, 119-120,136). Parishes and individuals could do more to reach their potential in relation to growth in faith learning (Littleton 2016, 194-195).

This empirical research finding on the important link between parish learning and individual learning outcomes confirms and affirms the claim made in the literature about the educational influence and formative power of the congregation or parish community on faith formation; the importance of the community of faith model for Christian education mentioned earlier.

Making faith learning visible in parishes

For a research project to proceed, the notion of a core characteristics learning community needed to be translated from the general categories to the specific, the measurable and the achievable in terms of identifying observable and reportable indicators of behaviours and learning (Littleton 2017, 2018). Self-reporting was used, with research participants reporting the degree of their growth and enhancement in faith learning. By growth in faith, I mean the degree to which people report that their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith has been enhanced (Littleton 2017, 49). Such self-reporting methods may be used in parish ministry too, to recognise learning outcomes through feedback by people reporting whether they experienced much growth or little growth.

The challenge is to make the learning of learners visible through methods of recognition. John Hattie outlined the idea of "visible learning" (Hattie 2015); emphasising the power of

feedback in the school context (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Such an evidence-based insight is helpful for learning recognition in parish faith education. Feedback enhances learning in parishes for individuals, groups and congregations (Littleton 2017).

Recognition for individual Christian learning in parishes involves finding reliable ways of enabling participants to let themselves and others know that learning has taken place or been achieved. Reporting on faith learning episodes is one such method; also, self-reporting feedback forms, faith sharing in groups, surveys, an excursion report, peer assessment (Walton 2000). After some educational events a certificate of attendance is provided at the end of the activity to confirm participation and list expected outcomes. In 2012, I prepared a unit of competency for a Lay Ministry Assistant in the Anglican Church in Adelaide. The matrix of learning recognition methods for that unit included: observation with questioning; discussion and demonstration; written questions; interview; third party verification and the production of a portfolio.

Congregations and parishes also learn (Shapiro 2017) and value affirmation through recognition of faith learning. Through leadership a parish can develop the "capacity to learn about itself, engender new insights, develop new behaviours and create new futures" (Littleton 2010, 25). Using a theological reflection process during a parish decision-making event enables reflective learning. Indicators used in the research project help describe learning enhancement (Littleton 2017). A verbal or written or filmed report on a parish faith learning event is another example of a learning recognition method. An inbuilt time of formal and brief reflection at the conclusion of a group or parish study or sermon series prompts effective learning. Creating a parish learning profile by working collaboratively with a group to gather data is another method (Littleton 2017, 101-102). Mutual and gentle recognition of learning helps growth in faith for individuals and parishes.

Development of a learning community methodology

Conversation with the approach of Receptive Ecumenism presents one way to use a learning community methodology. There are other ways of adapting the methodology to a variety of contexts, including Christian education in parishes.

"The question Receptive Ecumenism asks is: what can we—and what do we need to—learn and receive, with integrity, from the other traditions?" (SACC 2014; Murray 2014). The importance of that question cannot be overstated. It defines the approach of Receptive Ecumenism as listening to and learning from the other, rather than telling the other.

Learning community strategies provide processes which can be used together with a Receptive Ecumenism approach to enhance inter-church learning outcomes. A Receptive Ecumenism approach involves listening to and learning from the other in Christ. A learning community approach helps people to be receptive; to enter and engage with a listening, learning and reflective disposition in a safe place.

The example of a lecture presentation illustrates a local application in Adelaide of *a learning community methodology informed by Receptive Ecumenism*. In the example, the three learning community processes of holism, collaboration and theological reflection were used and influenced the choice of appropriate methods. A Receptive Ecumenism approach, when

combined with these learning community processes, enables positive ecumenical or inter-church learning outcomes to emerge through discernment in the Spirit of Christ.

In Adelaide, from 2008, the South Australian Council of Churches Committee for Ecumenical Learning organised 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 (twenty to thirty minutes) by the guest speaker. Each responder spoke for about five to ten minutes. Then, all participants discussed the topic for about ten minutes in small groups of three to five people. Questions or comments to the guest speaker and others concluded the ninety-minute session. By the end of this process the sixty people present had become a community of learning. The short-term intention in a lecture situation, for example, is for the leadership to help participants become a community of learning or a learning community in that situation at that time. In the longer term, helping churches to become learning communities is a way forward.

This example, along with other examples mentioned in the literature (Balabanski and Hawkes 2018, 96-97; Littleton 2018b, 106-108), serve as evidence of the multiple ways in which learning community processes can be combined with other approaches in varying contexts to enrich learning outcomes. This methodology can be applied in the parish context in relation to Christian education, which is "understood quite generally as designating those processes by which people learn to become Christian and to be more Christian" (Astley and Francis 1994, 3). Small groups in parishes would use the three learning processes.

In a parish context an interactive workshop may focus on the learning question: *How does your church/parish do Christian education?* Two pre-invited responders from two different parishes open the conversation by sharing what they discovered through the learning question after visiting and listening to the answers that two pre-invited people from two other parishes gave prior to the workshop event. The facilitator then invites other participants to enter the conversation. The conversation moves forward collaboratively through information and content learning towards deep learning outcomes related to Christian education. The in-the-round seating arrangement for this ninety-minute workshop encourages respectful conversation and reflection; all part of the process of discovering creative responses to the critical issue of Christian education in parishes.

Importance - Implications

Seven reasons for the importance of core characteristics learning community approach (CCLCA) emerged during the paper. These approaches provide seven effective educational perspectives with implications for parish ministry today.

First, the approach provided a framework for a major research study reported earlier in the paper and elsewhere (Littleton 2017; Littleton 2018a), and it may also become a framework for parish research project.

Second, Christian education is understood differently through the lens of this approach. A learning community focus for Christian education becomes apparent.

Third, this learning community approach for educational ministry practice in parishes is a way to enhance faith learning outcomes and to foster much growth in the Christian faith for parishes and individual disciples.

Fourth, the three learning processes offer a lens through which to view and interpret educational situations in the parish and beyond. A learning community lens can be applied to teaching and learning situations. For example, reflecting on the Gospel portraits of Jesus the Teacher through the lens of a learning community perspective indicated that the core characteristics were evident in the biblical portrayals of Jesus the Teacher.

Fifth, the research indicators derived from the three core characteristics suggest ways for faith learning to be recognised and made visible in parish-based Christian education. Self-reporting by individuals and parishes assists growth in faith and practice.

Sixth, the evidence-based research findings, based on CCLCA framework, uphold the literature on the educational influence of the parish community on faith formation and practice.

Seventh, the CCLCA methodology is flexible and adaptable for use in parish ministry and mission.

Conclusion

The investigation revealed that Christian education now has a learning community focus. The origins, theory and practice of CCLCA have been identified. The article showed how the CCLCA was used for research purposes and as a methodology for Christian education; an approach which enhances discipleship learning in parishes.

In the longer term, I hope that the leadership and membership of the Anglican Church of Australia and other churches may come to associate Christian education with learning communities in parishes; recognise the importance of the approach and its benefits for parish educational ministry in helping people learn to become Christian disciples and continue to be disciples within a community of faith set in contemporary society. The notion of the learning community, customised as CCLCA for the twenty-first century parish context, is an effective way to enhance faith learning and foster much growth in Christ for individuals and parishes.

References

Aron, Isa. 2000. *Becoming a Congregation of Learners*. Woodstock, Vermont USA: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Aron, Isa. 2002. *The Self-Renewing Congregation.* Woodstock, VT, USA: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Astley, Jeff and Leslie J. Francis. Eds.1994. *Critical Perspectives in Christian Education: a reader on the aims, principles and philosophy of Christian education*. Herefordshire, England: Gracewing.

Balabanski, Vicky and Geraldine Hawkes. Eds. 2018. *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ*. Adelaide, SA: ATF Press.

Balabanski, Vicky. 2020. *Colossians An Earth Bible Commentary: An Eco-Stoic Reading*. London/New York: T&T Clark.

Board of Education, UK. 2000. *Called to New Life: The World of Lay Discipleship, A Learning Church for a Learning Age*. London: Church House Publishing, Second Impression.

Burtchaell, James T. 1994. *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities*. England: CUP, Second reprint.

Collinson, Sylvia Wilkey. 2004. *Making Disciples: The Significance of Jesus' Educational Methods for Today's Church*. London: Paternoster Press.

Cox, Milton. 2009. "A Journey in Scholarship Development: The Role of learning Communities – A Message from the editor-in-Chief." *Learning Communities Journal* 1, 1,1-5.

Cranswick, Jim. 1976. "A Re-Assessment of the Catechumenate in the First Three Centuries: How they made mature adult Christians in the first three centuries." MA Thesis, Department of Theology, University of Birmingham, UK. Copy available St Paschal Library, Franciscan Order of Friars Minor, 90 Albion Road, Box Hill, Victoria 3128, Australia. Accessed February 2018 at mgr.library@franciscans.org.au)

Dinham, Stephen. 2016. *Leading Learning and Teaching*. Camberwell, Melbourne, Australia: ACER Press.

Dykstra, Craig. 1987. "The Formative Power of the Congregation." *Religious Education* 82, 4, 530-546.

Elias, John L. 2002. *History of Christian Education: Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Perspectives*. Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.

Everist, Norma Cook. 2002. *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education*. Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press.

Falcone, John P. 2016. "Training Lay People to "Practice" Scripture Rhetorically: A Pedagogical Model with Biblical Precedent and Warrant from the Gospel of Matthew." *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 13,1 (April): 4-17.

Fleischer, Barbara J. 2004. "From individual to corporate praxis: A systematic re-imagining of religious education". *Religious Education* 99, 3 (Summer): 316-333.

Fleischer, Barbara J. 2006. "The Ministering Community as Context for Religious Education: A Case Study of St Gabriel's Catholic Parish." *Religious Education* 101, 1 (Winter), 104-122.

Groome, Thomas H. 1980. *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision.* Melbourne, Australia: Dove Communications.

Groome, Thomas, H. 2011. *Will There Be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples.* New York: HarperOne.

Harmless, W. 1995. *Augustine and the Catechumenate*. Collegeville, Minnesota, USA: A Pueblo Book, The Liturgical Press.

Hattie, John and Helen Timperley. 2007. "The Power of Feedback." *Review of Educational Research* 77, 1.

Hattie, John. 2015. *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximising Impact on Learning*. New York: Routledge, 2012; Kindle Edition 2015.

Hawkins, Thomas R. 1997. *The Learning Congregation: A New Vision of Leadership*. Louisville, Kentucky, USA: Westminster John Knox Press.

Heywood, David. 2017. *Kingdom Learning: Experiential and Reflective Approaches to Christian Formation.* London: SCM Press.

Hill, Patrick, 1985. "The Rationale for Learning Communities." Inaugural Conference on Learning Communities, The Washington Center, USA. Accessed 27/2/2020. http://www.wacenter.evergreen.edu/learning-communities

Judge E.A.1960. *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century*. London: Tyndale Press.

Judge E.A. 1960/1961. "The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community," *Journal of Religious History*, 1,1: 4-15; 1, 3: 125-147.

Judge E.A. 1966. "The Conflict of Educational Aims in New Testament Thought." *Journal of Christian Education* 9, 1 (June): 32-45.

Kilpatrick, Sue, Margaret Barrett and Tammy Jones. 2003. "Defining Learning Communities." In Conference Paper, Australian Association of Research in Education. Auckland. http://www.CRLRA.utas.edu.au under Discussion Papers 2003, D1/2003. Accessed 14/2/2020.

Knight, Jonathon. 2008. *Christian Origins*. London: T&T Clark.

Littleton, John. 2008. "A Learning Community Focus for Christian Education." *Religious Education* 103, 5 (October-December).

Littleton, John. 2014. "Jesus as The Teacher: Facilitator of Learning". http://www.tjhlittleton.com.au

Littleton, Thomas John Harvard. 2016. "Enhanced Faith Learning in Parishes." DMin Thesis, Adelaide College of Divinity, South Australia.

Littleton, John. 2017. *Enhance Learning in Parishes: A Learning Community Approach for Church Congregations*. Unley, Adelaide, South Australia: MediaCom Education Inc.

Littleton, John. 2018a. "Enhanced learning in the parish context: a learning community approach." *Practical Theology* 11, 4: 320-333.

Littleton, John. 2018b. "Receptive Ecumenism, Ecumenical Learning and Learning Communities," in *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ*. Eds. Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes. Adelaide, South Australia: ATF Press.

Littleton, John. 2019. "Learning from Christ (How do we (be)come Christian?): Process is as Important as Content." hhtp://www.tjhlittleton.com.au. Accessed 20/5/20

Littleton, John. 2020. Book Review. Balabanski, Vicky. 2020. *Colossians An Earth Bible Commentary: An Eco-Stoic Reading*. London/New York: T&T Clark. hhtp://www.tjhlittleton.com.au. Accessed 20/5/20

Merritt, David. 1984. *Towards Renewal of the Church: The Urgent Task of Christian Education.* St Kilda, Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Council of Christian Education.

Mitchell, Craig. 2018. "(Re)forming Christian Education in Congregations as the Praxis of Growing Disciples for a Missional Church." Thesis, Doctor of Philosophy, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia.

Murray, Paul. 2014. "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism." *The Ecumenist, a Journal of Theology and Society*, 51, 2, 1.

Musurillo, Herbert. 1958. *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity by St. Methodius (A Treatise on the Perfect Practice of Christian Virtue).* Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation. New York, USA: Newman/Paulist Press.

Nelson, C. Ellis. 1971. *Where Faith Begins*. Richmond, Virginia, USA: John Knox Press.

Ottero, Lucille, M. & Michael J. Cottrell. 2019. "Adult religious education and learning in Canadian Catholic parishes: an area in need of empirical research." *Practical Theology* 12, 4, 433-445.

Owen, Susanne Mary. 2015. "Teacher professional learning communities in innovative contexts: 'ah hah moments', 'passion'and 'making a difference' for student learning." *Professional Development in Education Journal* 41, 1, 57-74.

Oxley, Simon. 2002. *Creative Ecumenical Education: Learning from One Another*. Geneva: Risk Book Series, World Council of Churches Publications.

Perkins, Pheme. 2012. *Reading The New Testament: An Introduction*. New York, USA: Paulist Press, Third Edition, Revised and Updated.

Prevost, Ronnie. 1997. "Editorial: The Congregation as Educator." *Religious Education* 92, 3 (Summer), 294-296.

Regan, Jane E. 2003. "The Aim of Catechesis: Educating for an Adult Church." In *Horizons & Hopes: The Future of Religious Education.* Thomas H. Groome and Harold Daly Horell. Eds. New York: Paulist Press.

Roberto, John. 2010. *Faith Formation 2020: Designing the Future of Faith Formation*. Naugatuck, CT, USA: Lifelong Faith Associates.

Rosenthal, James M. and Nicola Currie, Eds. 1997. *Being Anglican in the third millennium: Anglican Consultative Council X, Panama City 1996.* Harrisburg, PA, USA: Morehouse Publishing.

SACC - South Australian Council of Churches. 2014. *Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands: The promise and potential of Receptive Ecumenism* at http://sacc.asn.au Accessed 14/2/2020.

Saines, Don. 2015. "Learning to be the church: The value of learning theory for discipleship and mission." *Pacifica*, 28, 3 (October): 290-307.

Scholer, David M. Ed. 2008. *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays by E.A Judge*. Massachusetts, USA: Hendrickson Publishers.

Senge, Peter. 1990. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation*. Milsons Point, NSW, Australia: Random House.

Seymour, Jack and Donald E. Miller. 1982. *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education.* Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press.

Seymour, Jack L, Margaret Ann Crain, Joseph V Crockett. 1993. *Educating Christians: The Intersection of Meaning, Learning and Vocation*. Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press.

Seymour, Jack L. 2014. *Teaching the Way of Jesus: Educating Christians for Faithful Living*. Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press.

Shapiro, Nancy S. and Jodi H Levine. 1999. *Creating Learning Communities: A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organising for Change, and Implementing Programs.* San Francisco, USA: Jossey-Bass A Wiley Imprint.

Shapiro, Tim. 2017. *How Your Congregation Learns: The Learning Journey from Challenge to Achievement.* New York, USAS: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, An Alban Institute Book.

Smith, Claire. 2012. *Pauline Communities as 'Scholastic Communities': A Study of the Vocabulary of 'Teaching' in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.* Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck.

Trainor, Michael. 1992. *According to Luke: Insights for Contemporary Pastoral Practice*. North Blackburn, Victoria, Australia: Collins Dove.

Trainor, Michael. 2012. *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to The Gospel of Luke*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

Walton, Roger L. 2000. "Assessment in Adult Christian Education" in *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education*, Jeff Astley, Ed. Leominster, England: Gracewing, 90-112.

Westerhoff, John H. 1976. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* East Malvern, Melbourne, Australia: Dove Communications. Third Revised Edition was published New York, USA: Morehouse Publishing, 2012.

Westerhoff, John H. 1979. *Inner Growth Outer Change: An Educational Guide to Church Renewal*. East Malvern, Melbourne, Australia: Dove Communications.

Westerhoff, John. H. and O.C. Edwards.1981. *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis*. Wilton, Connecticut, USA: Morehouse-Barlow Co. Inc.

Young, Frances. 1996. "Paideia - What Can We Learn from the First Four Centuries?" in *Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel W Hardy*. Eds. David F. Ford and Dennis L. Stamps. Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd.