

## **Implications of a Learning Community approach for the image and concept of God: an exploratory study in Practical Theology by John Littleton.**

### Abstract

The work of the late Professor John Hull inspired this exploratory study in practical theology. During the course of the article a theology of learning community processes emerges. After a description of the holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective processes of a learning community, and describing various conceptions of God, which Hull articulated for the learning and teaching processes, the article draws on a number of theological resources to understand God at work in the world. Those theological understandings, when applied to the learning community processes, result in an outline of the implications those processes have for the concept of God.

### Keywords

John Hull; Practical Theology; Learning Community processes; Parish context.

### **Introduction**

In July 2015, fellow Australian, John Hull died at the age of 80 years in England, where he lived and worked most of his life. He was blind (Hull 1990). At the time of his death Hull was Honorary Professor of Practical Theology in the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and Emeritus Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham, UK.

Hull has been described as “a giant” in the international world of Christian Religious Education, Practical Theology and amongst academics working on a theology of disability (Bates, Durka and Schweitzer 2006; Hayhoe 2015; Mercer 2016). Obituaries appeared in the UK *Guardian* (Jackson 2015), the *International Journal of Christianity & Education* (Hayhoe 2015), the *British Journal of Religious Education* (Jackson 2016) (Hull was editor of the Journal 1971-1996), and the *Journal of Religious Education* (Miedema 2016). This article is written in his honour and inspired by his example.

The article explores the implications of a learning community approach for the image and concept of the God. Hull's article “Practical theology and religious

education in a pluralist Europe” (Hull 2004) sparked my interest in this topic. In that article he examined the processes of teaching and learning in education and religious education before exploring the theological issues of those processes (Hull 2004, 7). Hull analysed the implications of the processes of teaching and learning “for beliefs about God, the human being, and the nature of time” (Hull 2004, 8). In the article he used a four-fold framework of practical theology: current situation, context explained, theological reflection and then outcomes or solutions. This article also uses that framework.

### **Current situation**

Research conducted in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, South Australia, 2013-2014, examined parish educational ministry through the lens of a learning community approach.

A learning community approach 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.

*Holistic* processes are present, where there is a shared vision of the whole parish, with an emphasis on the whole Gospel, the whole person, where all are learning from God in and through Jesus Christ. The shared vision for the whole parish brings together the five parts of parish learning: individual learning; group learning; congregational learning; community engagement learning; and dialogical or receptive learning. There is an educational ministry for all kinds of people in the parish and beyond.

*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.

*Theologically reflective* processes in parishes involve people in reflecting upon or thinking about the way they live their lives in the light of the biblical story and traditions, and then how they can move forward, renewed for future action.

In a fully developed learning community the teacher or minister or priest or leader is a facilitator of learning and a reflective practitioner. The learning processes

are as important as the teaching programme (Littleton 2016). Learning is seen not only as a transmission of knowledge to individuals or the acquiring of knowledge by individuals but also as a social and conversational process of participation and interaction in meaning making with others in community (Jonassen and Land 2012).

## Research

In 2013, 47 of the 61 parishes in the Diocese of Adelaide responded to Survey One on learning processes and 45 parishes responded to Survey Two on faith learning outcomes. In 2014, focus groups were conducted in six of those parishes.

The research project revealed that, across a range or spectrum of parish responses, a moderate, positive and clear association existed between the three learning community processes and faith learning outcomes in the parish contexts investigated. The findings showed that the use of the holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes enhanced faith learning. In parishes using those processes the clergy, leaders, members and parish communities reported “very much” or “much” growth in their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith (Littleton 2016).

In summary, the research project focussed on the learning community processes and their association with positive faith learning outcomes.

Faith learning was defined as a process of growing in the knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith in and through Jesus Christ. Growth in faith meant the degree to which people reported that their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith had been enhanced (Littleton 2016).

## Implications

The process-centred definition of faith learning raises the issue of the essential relationship between process and growth in the Christian faith. Learning involves a permanent change of attitude and behaviour in a person or a group or community as a consequence of certain processes; namely holistic, collaborative and theological processes as outlined for the purposes of this article.

The questions now asked apply to the particular kind of learning community defined earlier in the article. Other views about the nature of learning communities exist but this section relates to the stipulated definition provided in this article.

What might be the implications of these three learning processes for the image and concept of God? What views of God might be implied by these learning processes? One answer to that question may point immediately to the church teaching on the immanence of God, God within human life and creation, rather than the teaching on the transcendence of God, mysterious, apart from and beyond human life and creation. It is, however, too early to discuss a theology of learning process based on God's immanence. More insights are yet to surface from Hull's article (Hull 2004) and from his seminal writing on the idea of God in relation to adult learning (Hull 1985).

### **Context explained further**

In his article Hull described education, the specific processes of teaching and learning and how these link to religion in general and the nature of Christian religious education in particular. After that description he asked the theological question about the image and nature of God. Hull turned his attention to five aspects of teaching and learning processes in religion and education and proposed various conceptions of God in relation to each aspect (Hull 2004,14-15). The five aspects he discussed were: ritual, authoritative transmission of teachings, cults and sects, conversion, and education.

First, the commitment to ritual involves training. Hull wrote:

The God whose nature is expressed mainly by training may be a magical God, for whom performance of repetitive manipulations is in itself satisfying and, from the point of view of the obedient practitioner, efficacious.

Second, those who place an emphasis upon the authoritative transmission of the teachings may tend to adopt an instructional approach. Hull wrote: "The God whose nature is best expressed through the process of instruction may be the authoritarian God who has nothing to learn but is all-competent, all knowing teacher."

Third, cults or sects might use techniques of indoctrination: isolation from the world, constant teaching and repetition of doctrines and the denial of freedom of thought and reasoned argument. Hull wrote: "The God behind the process of indoctrination may also be the authoritarian God."

Fourth, those teachers who seek to convert others to their own faith see teaching and learning processes as instruments toward conversion or commitment when the content of the teaching is transmitted with a tendency to invite passive

acceptance. The God of Christian evangelism, catechetics and nurture may be seen as exclusively Christian and not recognise other faiths as of truth. Such a God is an “instructional God.”

Fifth, the various processes of teaching and learning have implications for the nature of the person and the character of God. Those involved in education seek to develop the person and nurture mature humanity through the Christian faith in the service of others. Hull wrote:

The God that corresponds to the education process in the specific sense is the God who goes on learning. This is the God who rejoices in the ever-expanding novelty of the world, the partner of the world’s experience, the participator in human learning, the One in whom freedom, love and enquiry are grounded.

This God is learning and teaching, the One who enables humans and humanity to flourish and grow to maturity. This fifth position taken by Hull corresponds to his earlier writing on “Jesus Christ, God and Humanity: Partners in Learning” (Hull 1985, 199-239).

In his work *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* Hull argued: “There are undoubtedly certain aspects of some Christian beliefs which have a retarding effect upon adult religious learning” (Hull 1985, 201). He suggested that Jesus Christ was often “depicted as the authoritative and all knowing teacher,” the “unlearning Jesus” rather than the “questioning learner” (Hull 1985, 204-208). More attention should be given to the “more faithful image of Jesus Christ as the servant-saviour and learning-leader”(Hull 1985, 209).

He presented the view (in 1985 but still informative in 2016) that the authoritative, hierarchical, high status and instructional role of the official teaching role in the church made adult learning all the more difficult. The teaching role in the church must enable learning rather than control it, must consider the ordinary learner as an enquirer rather than a recipient in a passive role and inferior to the designated teacher. He wrote:

The assumptions of a uniform orthodoxy, of a content-based curriculum, of an instructional and non-learning Jesus still affect the environment within which attempts to facilitate the growth of Christian adults take place (Hull 1985, 211).

He argued for a “learning church” (Hull 1985, 212).

Hull also contemplated “a learning God” (Hull 1985, 218-237). His view was that, rather than seeing God, the divine educator as unlearning and only all knowing

and perfect in determining everything in a predetermined universe, we recognise that humans have free will along with creativity in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and that the divine delights in creation and may be surprised as a result of our creativity. He wrote, “God, therefore learns through his love of you, insofar as you present to him surprising creativity” (Hull 1985, 226).

The final paragraph in the book (Hull 1985, 237-238) drew Hull’s theme together:

In adult learning, adults are invited to become creative participants in their own learning and in the task of understanding and changing the world. We have seen that the very idea of the creation of a free world shows us that creativity is no longer the exclusive domain of the creator. What he creates, is creativity. The idea that God himself learns witnesses to the reality, the originality and the creativity of the world, the world of which we adults are part.

In this thought-provoking book, Hull challenged the reader to consider beliefs and practices, which prevented Christian adults from learning. He viewed “Jesus Christ, God and Humanity as Partners in Learning” (Hull 1985, 199). That partnership opened the way for human beings to flourish as learners and acknowledged that God learns through interaction with human beings.

Hull wrote “to be omniscient is not to know everything, only to know everything which is available to be known” (Hull 1985, 232). God learns from the new knowledge created by human beings acting in accord with God’s purposes (Hull 1985, 219).

Michael Hare Duke, who reviewed Hull’s book, suggested that even if people were concerned about Hull’s view on a learning God they needed to note:

There is a very real difference between a God who has an unchangeable purpose which He works out in interaction with His creation, and a God who sits back and observes the script being played out which He has already written (Hare Duke 1988, 178-180).

In a sermon on Trinity Sunday 2011 Hull celebrated the life of the Holy Trinity: the social Trinity, life of the social God; the inclusive Trinity, the life of an inclusive God; the suffering Trinity, the life of a suffering God; and the becoming Trinity, the life of our God of the future (Hull 2011). Hull said:

God is the one who was and is to come. Some people say that this could also mean the God who was is, and will become. For if God is the perfection of being, why should not God also be perfect in becoming? If we think of God in this way, we may regard God as being God in process. The life of God is enriched with all the novelty, the newness of life.

The futuristic tone of Hull's sermon draws attention to biblical passages in Revelation 1: 4, 8, where God is described as the One "who is and who was and who is to come." The God of the becoming beckons and welcomes us into the creation of new knowledge and to grow in newness of life.

In summary, learning processes suggest implications for the image and conception of God. For some, Hull's theology and the conclusions he reached may be new or different. Others may have been taken outside their comfort zone.

However, Hull's use of the discipline of practical theology is to be commended. To outline the theology of the practice of Christian learning has many benefits. It describes the theological assumptions that may underpin the learning processes used in parishes. It articulates the views of God that may be implied by the learning processes used in a parish. It prompts a question like: What kind of God is being presented in your congregation as discerned through the processes used? It provides practitioners with a method by which to reflect on the meanings behind educational practice in their context. Educators consider that educational practices and processes are "underpinned with very particular theories and theologies" (Swinton and Mowat 2011, 20; Astley and Francis 2013, 4-7).

As the narrative of this article unfolds let us proceed, in the manner of Hull's article, to describe views of God, which may be helpful as we examine the implications of holistic, collaborative and theological reflective learning processes for the image and concept of God.

### **Theological reflection**

Theological perspectives assist in relating learning processes to an understanding of God at work in parishes. The ways that human beings express their understanding of God's active presence in the world provide insight as we reflect on the implications of the learning community approach for the image and concept of God.

By the way of a side-look (Torrance 1980, 161, 172), note that this presentation of various conceptions of God is based on a respect for the corrigibility of theology. Those involved in theology are open to correction and the need to view things in new and different ways from time to time and place to place as new evidence emerges and new learning is revealed. John Austin Baker argued, "the concept of God has to be corrigible" (Baker 1996, 21-44). He wrote: "To put it bluntly, religious

believers have to be prepared to change their minds about God from time to time” (Baker 1996, 23).

Baker explained how understandings of God developed in the Bible, different periods in history having “differing pictures of God.” Various revelations and understandings of God that existed throughout the Old Testament were modified in the light of experience and radically redesigned for Christians in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament (Baker 1996, 28).

Baker’s writing also provided an example of the changing conceptions of God when he compared the picture of God as critic and judge to the concept of God as friend and partner (Baker 1970, 389).

Let us return now to the various theological perspectives to be presented. Those perspectives co-exist within the diversity of the Christian faith. Reference is made to resources from the Bible, Church doctrine, theology and spirituality.

### *The Bible*

The image of the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:12-27; Rom 12: 4-5) provides a biblical foundation for a learning community approach. As with a human body, a learning community is an organism, holistic, interdependent, inclusive and accessible one part to another, reflective and joined together in the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This “body of Christ” vision indicates that the three core processes of holism, collaboration and theological reflection are consistent with an exploration of this biblical image (Littleton 2016, 54-65).

A learning community perspective influenced Claire Smith in her study of the Pauline communities. She showed, by her analysis of the vocabulary of teaching in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, Timothy and Titus, that those “early Christian communities portrayed in four letters of the NT might faithfully and productively be characterised as ‘scholastic’ or ‘learning communities’” (Smith 2012, 390-391).

After describing the limitations of the term “scholastic communities”, (Smith 2012, 388-390) Smith outlined the advantages of using the improved term “learning communities”. Firstly, the adjective “learning” acknowledged that members of such communities learnt from God “who is the ultimate teacher from whom all learn”. As she wrote, “God himself [sic] was an essential participant in the educational environment of these Pauline communities.” Secondly, those who were teachers

within the believing community were co-learners with others as all “are addressees of God’s teaching activities”. She then added:

Finally, ‘learning communities’ more faithfully reflects the purpose and result of the educational environment, which was not that people would teach, but that all would learn and be transformed in belief and conduct (Smith 2012, 390).

Reading and reflecting on the Gospel portrayals of Jesus as the Teacher through the lens of a learning community perspective identified his use of learning community processes (Littleton 2014). Jesus was, in 21<sup>st</sup> century educational language, a teacher for all kinds of people in a range of different venues and situations. He taught in collaborative ways, used an interactive teaching style and facilitated learning for and from ministry practice. Jesus was a practitioner of theological reflection as illustrated in his many parables.

Scripture refers to the role of the divine in the educational process. Groome reminded teachers that: “God’s grace works through nature – here, the good efforts of religious educators.” He wrote: “[b]alance our own best efforts with the memory of God’s grace; God gives the growth” (1 Cor 3: 6) (Groome 2011, 338).

### *Church Doctrine*

#### The Trinity

John Macquarrie used traditional and contemporary language to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity. He wrote:

Thus we may say that the doctrine of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) tries to elucidate the picture of God as he appears in the biblical narrative and in the history of the Christian community. He is a God who embraces diversity in unity; who is both transcendent and immanent; who is dynamic and yet has stability (Macquarrie 1966, 176).

Macquarrie also offered a more contemporary (in 1966 but still informative in 2016) way of expressing the Trinity in the understanding of God-as-Being, Holy Being: primordial Being (Father), expressive Being (Jesus) and unitive Being (Spirit). The essence of God is to let be, to let there be human beings (Macquarrie, 1966, 179-193).

In recent years members of a Dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches in South Australia prepared a discussion paper on the theological

foundations for lay ministry. The authors of that paper presented the Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God as the key theological foundation for lay ministry. The section in the paper on “The Triune Life of God” contributed a number of statements that described God’s attributes (Theological Foundations for Lay Ministry 2008-2010, 6-9).

Those attributes so described often correspond to the ways that learning community processes are described.

The Dialogue group members wrote:

Mutual reflection on leadership and ministry is firmly grounded in our appreciation of the triune life of God. The mutual, communal, diverse and unified life of the triune God is commonly affirmed by and agreed upon by our churches.

The doctrine of the Trinity provided:

A realisation that God’s triune life is unified, diverse, mutual, communal, hospitable and respectful. This life permeates our ecclesial institutions and makes them ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’.

The final paragraph in the section on the triune life of God issued this challenge:

We may ask whether... our churches reflect God’s household: a domain of openness, hospitality, inclusiveness, interdependence and cooperation, according to the model of *perichoresis* (being-in-one-another) within the triune God.

Thomas Torrance, in his lectures on the Trinity also described the nature of God’s Triune life. He emphasised the reciprocity within the life of the Triune God’s way of Being –Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the “profound reciprocity between God and man established by God’s incarnational self-communication to us” in Jesus Christ (Torrance 1980, 159). This give and take, the reciprocal movement within God’s own Being and between God and humanity sets an example for human behaviour. It indicates the significance of reciprocity and collaboration in the communication and learning amongst and between human beings.

Marelle Harisun referred to the Holy Trinity when she made an ethnographic analysis of theological and ecclesiological understandings and praxis of power in the Uniting Church of Australia (UCA) (Harisun 2007). During that study she developed a typology of power in relation to theology and ecclesiology. Power between-and-among-and-with featured on the left hand side of the continuum. Power-over-and

against featured on the right side of the continuum. Power to/within the individual featured in a central position.

The data derived from her case studies of the 2004/2005 Synods and 2006 Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia demonstrated “a relationship between people’s understanding of God, their concept of what it means to be church, and the way they exercised power” though that relationship may not be causal. Those who understood “God as “omnipotent” Father, Lord, King and the church as fortress or haven from the world seem most likely to exercise power in a power-over and even a combative mode.” Those who understood God as the Truine One, as the Trinity and the church as a pilgrim people on a journey with the presence of the Spirit “are more likely to exercise power in synergistic, shared modes”, power between-and-among-and-with others (Harisun 2008, 8-9).

Harisun’s theology of power suggests that when we act in imitation of the Trinitarian God as exhibited in the person and life of Christ we “will be a community of mutuality and diversity” and invoke the presence of the Spirit (Harisun 2008, 11). These examples of the exercise of power in the church illustrate that the ways people exercise power is likely to imply various images and concepts of God.

A resource on the Mission-Shaped Church included this statement:

The core idea underpinning the phrase ‘mission-shaped church’ is that the Church in all its forms needs to be an active participant in God’s mission, the *missio dei*. As the 1998 Lambeth Conference explained, ‘Mission goes out from God. Mission is God’s way of loving and saving the world’” (Nichols 2006, 1).

The triune God is a communicating God in sending his Son, Jesus Christ to live as a human being in the world, as recorded in the Bible, the inspired Word of God. The missionary nature of God is emphasised.

### *Theology*

#### Process theology

Charles Birch, a process theologian, wrote that the understanding of “...God as persuasive love as opposed to coercive power” was central to the message of Jesus (Birch 1995,107). Bruce Epperly stated:

Process theologians suggest that God’s relationship to the world is intimate and continuous rather than distant and discontinuous. God is not ‘wholly other,’ but rather

the ‘wholly present one.’” Also, “God’s nature and relationship with the world can be described in terms of the basic principles of process metaphysics: dynamic process, interdependence, creativity and freedom, and the universality of experience (Epperly 2011, 28).

### Panentheism

Scott Cowdell investigated ways that God is “found ‘in, with and under’ the life of the world, though not exhausted by the life of the world” (Cowdell, 2000, 54, 104). From this investigation he concluded that we could appreciate and view God as “panentheistic” (Cowdell 2000,123). This “panentheistic” God is at work in the world in a “double agency form.” For Cowdell the evolutionary God is respectfully at work in and through the general providence of the processes of nature, and at the same time working through a special providence “bringing about certain particular outcomes through natural processes where the way allows it,” and honouring “free processes and free will” (Cowdell 2000, 113, 124). Christians discern that such a special outcome in accord with God’s purposes is “fully expressed in Jesus Christ”.

Cowdell expressed the “panentheistic” or double agency way in which God is active in the world in these words: “It is not a sense of God helping, of being a part of the action, but of God performing the action while at the same time the acting person performs it” (Cowdell 2000, 65). Panentheism emphasises God’s participation in the processes of life and learning.

### The Go-Between God

John V. Taylor named God as the “Go-Between God” (Taylor 1972). When writing about “The Go-Between God” Taylor reported on the experience of an awareness of God when he wrote; “The Holy Spirit is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware” (Taylor 1972, 19). He commented: “If for one reason or another we refuse really to *see* another person, we become incapable of sensing the presence of God” (Taylor 1972, 19). Taylor’s conviction about the “Go-Between God” emphasises the importance of spirituality and the mutuality of human relationships in the learning processes of the life of faith.

## The Ground of our being

Paul Tillich named God as the ground of our being: “The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means” (Tillich 1962, 63).

Diana Butler Bass understands God to be within the world rather than “God majestic, transcendent, all-powerful, heavenly Father, Lord and King located in a few select places, mostly in external realms above or beyond: heaven, the church, doctrine or the sacraments” (Butler Bass, 2015, 21). She writes about a God that is with us, within creation, culture and the cosmos. Butler Bass presents a theology of nearness rather than distance; a ground up God; God who dwells with humankind in love and justice, incarnated in Jesus, a grounded God. She writes: “God is the ground, the grounding, that which grounds us” (Butler Bass 2015, 27, 42-43). Butler Bass believes in a God who is gracious mystery, ever greater, ever nearer through a new awareness of the earth (soil, water, sky, home) and in the lives of neighbours.

## *Spirituality*

Spirituality presents insights that human beings, through prayer, worship and action, can be co-workers, ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20), partners with God, and in relationship, listening, learning...being guided, sustained, strengthened, loved and blessed in and by God’s presence. Robert Warren defined spirituality as “our understanding and experience of how encounter with God takes place and how such an encounter is sustained (Warren 1995, 89).

George Appleton’s prayer provides an example:

(Before Prayer) O Holy Spirit, be with us in this time of prayer, and grant us living touch with thee. Give us the insights of thy kingdom, the vision of thy purpose, the guidance of thy wisdom, and the grace to be fellow-workers with thee in the doing of thy just and loving will, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Appleton 1967, 20).

Through regular spiritual exercises people seek to maintain an ongoing living relationship with God, to be in tune with God through Jesus Christ.

Taylor lists of five blessings experienced by those who pray, are receptive and commune with God: greater understanding, inner resources of courage and creativity, wholeness, reconciliation and the presence of love in the Christlike God (Taylor 1992, 272-279).

Practitioners of a learning community approach recognise that the Holy Spirit does the work of Jesus Christ in and through human beings. In the Gospel according to John, we learn that the Helper, the Holy Spirit, is a teacher whom God will send in Jesus' name to "teach you all things, and bring to mind all that I said to you" (Jn14: 26). This Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is present in the learning and teaching processes in parishes through the life, skill and sensitivity of the teacher in attending to the scriptures and in the selection of teaching content and methods. The Spirit of Christ becomes a presence in the receptive and inspired learner as they grow towards Christlikeness in an hospitable learning environment (Newton 2001, 125-129).

### **Bringing the theological perspectives together and forward ...**

The images and concepts of God outlined in the biblical, doctrinal, theological and spirituality references, including the references to Hull's theology, point to a variety of options from which to choose in the next section of the article. Words used about God in those references are listed as they apply to the task of discerning the implications of the learning community processes for the image and concept of God.

Insights from those references provide key words and phrases, which describe attributes of God's nature as applied generally to the learning community processes.

Some of those words and phrases are:

- a teaching and go-between God from whom all learn
- a God participating in the educational environment of a congregation
- a relating, communicating and guiding God, experienced through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, who acts as catalyst for faith learning
- a Triune God with the qualities of holiness and mystery, reciprocity, respect, openness, hospitality, inclusion, interdependence and cooperation
- a sending and communicating God with a mission and a message
- an immanent God who is the ground of our being; near, relational, loving and just, exercising power with and amongst
- a creator, creative and partner God who encourages creativity
- a panentheistic God, active in, within and under the world, communicating, participating in and through Jesus Christ the reflective learner and teacher.

Drawing on the range of theological perspectives and the listing of God's attributes as applied in general to the learning community processes, the next section relates those attributes more specifically to each learning process.

Those who use holistic processes draw on and reflect qualities of God's triune life, the qualities of inclusivity, hospitality and cooperation in the midst of diversity.

Those who use collaborative processes draw on and reflect the qualities of a God who is active within the world, communicating, participating, reciprocal, exercising power amongst and working with and through others in Jesus Christ.

Those who use theologically reflective processes draw on and reflect a teaching, learning and go between God; a guiding and creative God, experienced through the Holy Spirit, who acts as catalyst for and a partner in faith learning.

For brevity and clarity, three words, selected from the previous paragraphs, succinctly describe and represent the attributes of God which relate to the learning processes: *inclusive* for the holistic processes, *participating* for collaborative processes and *guiding* for theologically reflective processes.

As mentioned in the title, this article is an exploratory one, exploring the possibilities, which emerge from a study in practical theology, "theological reflection on the church's practice" (Astley and Francis 2013). Some may consider that the article moves too quickly through each section and focuses too broadly on various beliefs about God and the three learning processes rather than moving with one theme. The nature of exploration is to cover the general landscape, learn from that scenarios and then focus on the particular aspect or aspects discovered. An article focussed on one topic may follow on from this article.

Such an article might discuss the difference that an understanding of a *participating* God may make to ministry practice in congregations. The understanding of God's nature does indeed have implications for ministry practice in parishes. However, the intention in this current article is to indicate aspects of God's nature implied by the learning processes used in the learning community approach already outlined.

## **Learning outcomes**

The learning community processes have implications for the nature and character of God. In the manner of John Hull, and sometimes using his wording as quoted, I present three learning outcomes that have been achieved in this article; learning outcomes that apply in a parish context.

First, “The God whose nature is expressed mainly” by the holistic learning processes in the diverse setting a parish learning community context is *inclusive*, hospitable and cooperative; hospitable to, inclusive of and cooperating with all kinds of people with a variety of learning styles, living in many different situations and learning through the many aspects of parish learning.

Second, “The God whose nature is expressed mainly” through collaborative learning processes in a parish learning community context is a *participating* God who encourages creativity; participating through interactive learning and the many abilities and contributions of parishioners.

Third, “The God whose nature is expressed mainly” through the theological reflection processes in a parish learning community context is the *guiding* and loving God of Jesus, as portrayed in Scripture, experienced in worship and discerned through the Spirit; guiding and partnering through the consideration given to biblical passages, church teaching and life experiences during the reflective teaching and learning opportunities available across a range of Christian traditions.

## **Conclusion**

The God revealed in this short study of learning community processes is not authoritarian or magical or indoctrinatory or mainly instructional, but inclusive, participatory and guiding.

In the study there is an emphasis on God’s immanence but not to the exclusion of God’s transcendence. The immanent reveals the transcendent. An awareness of the “wholly other” One is experienced through the “wholly present” One.

The God who corresponds to the learning community processes in parishes is an inclusive, participating and guiding presence amongst human beings; people who are freely involved and receptive to a Christian new life world view through faith and practice.

Awareness of God's nature and presence in the learning processes may enhance a learning community practitioner's spirituality and practice. Appreciation of the nature of God's presence – inclusive, participating, guiding – may increase an understanding of any connection between God's nature and work in the world and the evidence-based research findings about the growth in faith reported by parishioners when they participated in the holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes.

Finally, the words 'God, Jesus Christ and Human Beings: Partners in Learning' (expressed in the manner of Hull 1985, 199) summarise a theology of learning community processes that emerged during the course of this article. An inclusive, participating and guiding God moves within the learning community processes as a respectful partner during the learning of individuals and faith communities in and through Jesus the Christ.

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