

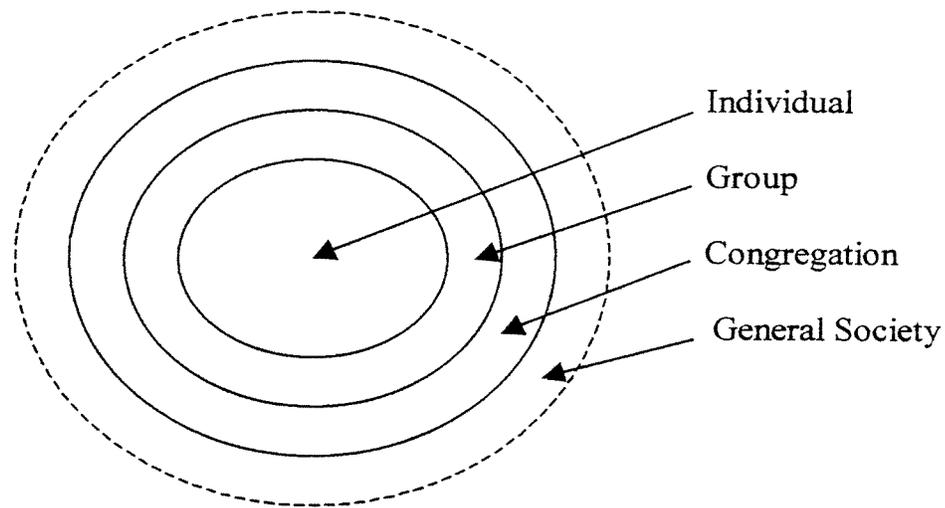
# **Leadership in the Congregation that Learns**

*By The Reverend John Littleton*

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005 I led a Ministry Development Workshop at Gladstone in The Diocese of Willochra on the theme of the congregation as a learning community. The learning community approach to Christian Education helps a congregation discover and develop an educational ministry for the whole congregation. The eleven parish leaders (clergy and lay), who participated in the two hour workshop at Gladstone, undertook a practical exercise of review after being introduced to an understanding of the congregation as a learning community and the kind of leadership required.<sup>1</sup>

## **A LEARNING CONGREGATION FOCUS**

The learning community approach to Christian Education requires leaders to be multi-skilled and multi-faceted in their educational ministry for the whole congregation. Leadership is an educative task. Christian education seen in the context of the congregation as a learning community has four key aspects as indicated in figure 1.



*Figure 1. Four Aspects of Christian Education*

In the learning community four people-centred aspects appear for consideration: the individual, the group, the congregation as a whole, and the general society where Christians and those who do not belong to a community of faith, live and work. Leadership skills are required for each of these four significant congregational responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

My writing on the parish as a learning community has grown out of many years of parish experience as an Anglican priest and Christian educator as well as through reading and discussion.<sup>3</sup> As a learning community practitioner I would suggest that leaders are required to be competent in some general aspects and some specific skills of ministry. An outline of the competencies will assist in reshaping current leaders towards leadership in the church as a learning community. Practical exercises of Review and Overview will then be described.

## COMPETENCY

Leaders need to have adequate knowledge, ability and qualifications in the following areas: the learning community concept, biblical and theological background, spirituality, collaborative leadership style, theory and practice of Christian Education, encouraging a culture of Christian learning and an awareness of the concept of the “mixed economy church”.

Leaders need to understand the *learning community concept*, have a vision of the entire parish as a learning community and the ability to work towards an educational ministry for all people in the congregation. This will involve a discussion of the parish or congregation as a learning community before looking at particular programmes, courses, approaches or resources, that is looking at the whole before selecting the parts.

Leaders will not only be required to have a *sound biblical and theological knowledge and a commitment to God-in-Christ but also to have some training and experience in the theological and ministry reflection*. Such background will enable the leader to offer guidance on topics suggested by members of the congregation rather than relying on programmes or resources prepared by others elsewhere. Often in a learning community topics cannot be programmed beforehand; rather they are home grown and locally resourced. Learning is greatly facilitated when the leader is able to adapt the educational approach to different contexts and has the ability to design and develop learning programmes. Thomas Groome’s shared Christian praxis approach, as outlined in his influential book “Christian Religious Education Sharing Our Story and Vision”, is very helpful in developing learning programmes.

*Leadership style* has a positive or negative influence on the formation of a learning community. Leaders will need to offer a collaborative and shared ministry leadership style which encourages the discipleship of all members of the

church in a partnership of ministry and mission. A “one person band” clergy authoritarian leadership style can stifle learning in a congregation. When a team of clergy and lay members work in a shared ministry there is a better chance of best practice Christian Education happening.<sup>4</sup>

*Leadership and spirituality* are an important duo in the context of a learning community discussion. Spirituality is a topic of much interest in our Australian society these days.<sup>5</sup> As outlined in my article “Approaches to Christian Education” nurturing spiritual growth is one of four approaches to Christian Education. The other three approaches focus on the faith community, mission and formal teaching.<sup>6</sup> As suggested in that article spirituality may well be the basic experience which motivates the other three approaches. Indeed growing the spiritual life provides the “final criterion” for evaluating any approach to Christian Education.<sup>7</sup> On writing that article I resolved in the future to begin any Christian Education activity with an intentional time to create hospitable space. Hospitable space is where there is respect for God and for the people present.<sup>8</sup> This introductory activity offers each person an opportunity to be open to the Spirit before proceeding. Leaders need to recognise this “spiritual dimension” in practical ways in any educational context as well as being clear about their own spirituality.

Leaders in a learning community need to have some background in *the theory and practice of Christian Education*. As I have suggested elsewhere the theory and practice of Christian Education these days must involve an initial discussion of parishes as learning communities in order to set in place the overall picture before looking at the parts.<sup>9</sup> The topic “Christian Education” offered at the Adelaide College of Divinity and Flinders University of South Australia provides an overview of Christian Education.<sup>10</sup> Understanding adult learning principles and their application in practical situations would also need to be part of the leader’s background.

Leaders need to have the ability to identify and describe a parish culture. The formation of a *culture of Christian learning* can be better encouraged when leaders have the skills of managing cultural change and strategic planning. The factors identifying a Parish culture affect its integrity and decision-making. When I was Rector of St. Saviour's Anglican Church, Glen Osmond I described the Church in my 2006 annual report as "a modern, progressive and outward looking Parish Community – a broad church with a liberal catholic background". I then listed a number of factors which identified the culture of the Parish, as follows:

- "The Parish Vision and Directions.
- Connecting faith and daily living nourished and strengthened through the Eucharist.
- Clergy and laity shared ministry – team work and consultation. The parish book "Spiritual Presence", soon to be published, is a symbol of this shared approach to ministry.
- A commitment to think about our Christian faith as members of a generous-hearted Church.
- A conversation approach to the use of the Bible – inclusive language. Biblical and theological reflection is central to our worship and parish life.
- The ordination of women is an important part of our tradition.
- Developing the church of the future; a unity in diversity approach
- An outreach and ecumenical viewpoint giving honour to all in the name of Christ.<sup>11</sup>"

Leaders need to be aware of the *concept of the "mixed economy church"*, and the relationship of this mixed economy to an understanding of the parish as a

learning community. During 2006 Archbishop Jeffrey Driver introduced the concept of the mixed economy of the Mission-Shaped Church to the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide.<sup>12</sup> In the mission-shaped church members are encouraged to reach beyond themselves in mission to create fresh expressions of church life. A fresh expression is a form of Church established primarily for the benefit of people in our changing culture who are not yet members of any church (e.g. Café Churches, newly planted congregations, workplace churches). In a mixed economy church traditional ways of being church exist side by side with these newer forms or fresh expression of church life which help to grow new Christians. Each parish may need to provide an ongoing group where new Christians can learn about and grow in the Christian faith.

The learning community approach provides a useful framework for the provision of variety in educational ministry, for “seekers, disciples and apostles”.<sup>13</sup> Nurturing the faith of church members assists them in the sharing of that faith with enquirers in order to help them become disciples of Jesus too. Leaders in the mixed economy of the learning community need to be equipped to enable a variety of educational approaches to co-exist.

## **SOME OTHER SPECIFIC SKILLS**

Christian Education seen in the context of the congregation as a learning community has four aspects as indicated in figure 1.<sup>14</sup> Leadership skills are needed for each of these four significant facets of a congregation’s responsibilities. Here are some examples:

- For individual learning – pastoral care and counselling skills, supervision skills, resourcing individuals in faith and spiritual formation.

- For group learning – small group leadership skills, skill in resource design and selection for a variety of situations including families.
- For congregational learning – consultancy/facilitating skills, leading and designing worship services, enabling shared leadership and team learning, cultivating congregational learning through decision making and managing change.
- For general society – enabling lay ministry in daily life, supporting chaplaincy ministries, educating the general public in matters of the Christian faith, marketing parish ministry and mission (e.g. internet), evangelism skills.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This outline of leadership competency may seem demanding if not daunting! Other skills could well be added to the list. Developing all or many of these competencies may take years.<sup>15</sup> This need for multi-skilled and multi-faceted leadership may seem to some to be one of the limitations of the learning community approach. New ministers do however receive an introduction to many of these competencies in their ministry formation and post-ordination training, as is the case in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. In addition to the formal biblical and theological studies the Diocese of Adelaide 2005/2006 ministry formation and post-ordination training included the following topics: Mission and Evangelism, Health and Vital Churches, Christian Education I, Ministry and Priesthood, Building Church Community, Strategic Ministry and Leadership, Worship, Pastoral Care and Christian Education II.<sup>16</sup>

The learning community focus will provide an ongoing skills development programme for clergy and lay leaders. Continuing ministry education guidelines as in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide make possible a significant period of leave each year for ministers to enhance ministry for furthering their knowledge, experience and skills.<sup>17</sup>

Through their initial formation and training and taking up continuing ministry education opportunities ministers can gradually increase their range of leadership skills for the learning community approach. This equipping of leaders will further assist the formation and growth of individuals and congregations in the Christian faith, life and ministry, in response to God's sacred presence through Jesus Christ.

## **PRACTICAL EXERCISES FOR WORKSHOP USE**

The learning community approach is a useful framework for identifying and designing an educational ministry for the whole congregation. It allows local Christian learning needs to emerge. Figure 1 provides a very helpful diagram. The simple concentric circles are an effective way to remember the total parish learning scene. They also provide a checklist for review and overview.<sup>19</sup>

## **REVIEW**

In a workshop situation the leader invites the participants to list individually on an enlarged version of the concentric circles, evidence of the learning programmes/activities in their congregation/parish community. There is then a discussion about the many examples mentioned in the various circles – individual, group/family, congregation, general society. The telling of stories about Christian Education creates great enthusiasm and energy. Examples of Christian Education

tumble out in the conversations of a workshop – an excellent and natural way of resource sharing. This may take some time.

Once the content of the four circles has been described and discussed participants are invited to respond to these questions: What does this information tell you about the learning opportunities in your parish community? Is there any hint of a future direction? The leader may make suggestions. The discussion may well lead to an initial idea towards designing a new aspect of educational ministry in that congregation. The following six stage process may be used: the initial idea to help people grow and mature in the life of faith; defining the needs and gaining support; design the Christian learning programme; organization and equipment; implement the programme; then reflect and evaluate.<sup>20</sup>

## **OVERVIEW**

The four concentric circles (figure 1) also provide an overall picture of possible parish learning opportunities for major festivals and other parish events/activities. At Easter and Christmas for example all four aspects – individual, group/family, congregation and general society in which people live and work – are to be considered in parish thinking and planning. The four aspects may expand the horizon of possible activities. Some suggestions may be more achievable at certain times than at other times. It is always a choice. I used this overview approach in my Christmas 2005 letter written when I was parish priest at St. Saviour's Anglican Church, Glen Osmond, Adelaide. Here is an extract from that Christmas letter.<sup>21</sup>

*Dear Friends*

*I look forward to being amongst you in our Parish Community this Christmas as we focus on the Parish theme “MAKING ROOM FOR JESUS!”*

*Let us reflect on Christmas and its meaning as we look at four aspects of our lives – the individual, the group/family, the congregation and the society in which we live and work. Consider ways of making room for Jesus under these four headings – ways of being involved in Christmas celebrations.*

*THE INDIVIDUAL. Each of us as an individual can participate in theological and biblical reflection, thinking about the birth of Jesus in various ways. We may send Christmas Cards and give presents. Re-reading the bible passages is rewarding – St. Matthew chapters 1-2, St. Luke chapters 1-2, St. John chapter 1: 1-18. “My Book of Bible Stories” published by Lion Children’s Books 2002 is a good read for children 6 years – 9 years. The relevant New Testament sections in the book are called “The Baby in the Manger” and “The Wise Men and the Star”. This book is available at The Bible Society. Bible Reading Fellowship notes are helpful for adults. Individuals give to the needy at this time.*

*THE FAMILY OR GROUP. There are many ways of celebrating Christmas at home – Advent candles, Bible stories, Christmas Tree, Christmas Carols. Many families place a Crib Scene in a prominent place at home. Adults, young people and children in various groupings of family and friends enjoy Christmas dinner together and give to the Christmas Bowl Appeal. Some elderly at home may also enjoy a Christmas home communion as part of Parish pastoral care.*

*THE CONGREGATION. This is the time when individuals, groups and families all come together as St. Saviour’s Church Community to celebrate Christ’s birthday. The details of the Christmas Worship Services are available in this Parish Paper. Gathered, we focus on the original, the birthday of Jesus and its*

*meaning for life today. Together we make room for Jesus in our lives. Children's ministry activities bring an element of surprise to our celebrations. Together we are encouraged, supported and strengthened in our Christian Faith as we enjoy "spirited worship" in a caring community.*

*GENERAL SOCIETY. Many enjoy participating in local Community activities, Carol Services in the park or the Norwood Christmas Parade or the Pageant. School Carol Services are also popular. Christmas presentations in local schools are organised by Chaplains in State Schools. Workplaces have Christmas functions. Shops and businesses are in full swing for the season of Christmas. Christmas Day is a Public Holiday. Santa Claus or Father Christmas is very much part of the scene. Shopping abounds. Holidays are taken.*

*The Festival of Christmas is a time to pause, enjoy and to value. The Festival of Christmas is the time to make room for Jesus in the activities of your life. Some of the approaches outlined in this letter may be new to you, many may be very familiar. Try something new in 2005. The first time we placed a small nativity scene in our home was very special.*

## CONCLUSION

These practical exercises of review and overview place the demanding leadership role in a learning congregation into a creative and realistic context. Leaders have to put their skills into practice with actual people in actual situations. Leaders are enablers, helping individuals and congregations learn the Christian faith and live accordingly in Christ-like ways in contemporary society. The learning community invites leaders to introduce relevant learning content for a variety of situations. Learning becomes a key to revitalising the individual and congregational life.<sup>22</sup> As leaders, enjoy your leadership responsibility. Grow in your faith and leadership skills. Promote and facilitate learning “in the name of Christ”.<sup>23</sup>

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*March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

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## References:

1. This workshop was organised by the Ministry Development Officer, The Anglican Diocese of Willochra and held in the Bishop's House, Gladstone, South Australia.
2. Roediger W.E.W. and Littleton T.J.H. (ed) (2006) *Spiritual Presence: Commemorating 150 Years at Glen Osmond*, Openbook Print, p.112. The concentric circles might remind some readers of John Westerhoff's use of the rings of a tree trunk image to outline four distinctive styles of faith: experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching faith and owned faith. Westerhoff J.H. (1976) *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, Dove Communications, pp.89-99. However, I used the concentric circles independently of the Westerhoff image and well before the possible image association was pointed out to me.
3. See for background a series of eight articles I have written on *Being a Learning Community in the Parish – Recognising How it is and Seeing What it could Become*. Littleton J. 2003-2006 available [www.stsavioursgo.net](http://www.stsavioursgo.net)
4. Littleton J. (2003) *Helping Christian Education Flourish in Congregations* Article 5, pp.19-21.
5. Tacey D. (2000) *Re-Enchantment, The New Australian Spirituality* Harper Collins, is one publication which supports this statement.
6. Littleton J. (2003) *Approaches to Christian Education* article 4, [www.stsavioursgo.net](http://www.stsavioursgo.net)
7. Ibid. p.16
8. Littleton J. (2003) *Moments of Learning from God* article 3. P.12, [www.stsavioursgo.net](http://www.stsavioursgo.net)
9. Littleton J. (2004) *A Congregation Learning*, article 6, pp.6-7, [www.stsavioursgo.net](http://www.stsavioursgo.net)
10. Bachelor of Ministry course (Theo 2506) Christian Education 2005/2006, one semester, 13 sessions led by Dr Deidre Palmer B.A., Dip.Ed., MRE, PhD., Adelaide College of Divinity and Flinders University School of Theology Handbook 2006. "The course provides an overview of Christian Education as it takes place in and through the Christian community of faith. Students will practise and develop their skills in educational design and teaching".
11. Report from the Rector (February 2006) to the Annual Vestry Meeting, St. Saviour's Anglican Church, 2 Pridmore Road, Glen Osmond, SA 5065.
12. Nichols A. ed (2006) *Building the Mission-Shaped Church in Australia*, General Synod Office, Anglican Church of Australia, Sydney. The Archbishop encouraged the use of this book following the annual Diocesan Clergy Conference (September 2006) for the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide. The Clergy Conference theme was "Reaching Beyond Ourselves: Mission; fresh expressions, planning and planting".
13. Anglican Diocese of Adelaide Diocesan Council's Statement of Strategic Directions for 2006-2010 presented to Diocesan Synod October 2006, p.7; Littleton J. (2007) *Christian Education in the Mixed Economy of the Mission-Shaped Church*, article 10, available from the author.
14. Roediger W.E.W. and Littleton T.J.H. op cit, p.112.

15. For someone like myself, who has been in active educational ministry for 40 years, leadership in a learning community is creative and demanding rather than daunting. T.J.H. Littleton B.A., B.Ed, DipRK, MACE. Ordained priest 1971. I am now a retired Anglican priest who is a Consultant in Christian Education for parishes and living at Magill in the Diocese of Adelaide.
16. Anglican Diocese of Adelaide Ministry Development Programme Calendar 2006.
17. Anglican Diocese of Adelaide Ministry Development Council Continuing Ministry Education Resource Book, February 2004. The guidelines provide a ten (10) day period of leave each year for ministers to enhance ministry by developing knowledge, experience and skills.
18. Roediger W.E.W. and Littleton T.J.H. op cit. p.112.
19. The practical exercise of review was first used in The Diocese of Willochra 16/10/05. The practical exercises of review and overview were used in the Diocese of Adelaide Southern Deanery meeting 9/8/06. Participants engaged well with the material which generated good discussion.
20. Emmett J. (2002) *The Godbearing Life, Faithful Everyday Living, Discipleship in action*, a Workbook for Leaders of Educational Ministries. Uniting Education, section 5, pp.45-48.
21. Littleton J. (2004) St. Saviour's Anglican Church, 2 Pridmore Road, Glen Osmond. PARISH PAPER for Christmas 2005, Rector's Letter. The Rector's letter for Easter 2006 in the Parish Paper is also available. The Rector's letter on "Our Faith Journey" August 2006 also uses the overview approach and is available from the Parish Paper through the Parish Office.
22. Aron Isa (2000) *Becoming a Congregation of Learners, Learning as a key to Revitalising Congregational Life*, Jewish Lights Publishing U.S.A., part of the Revitalising Congregational Life: A Synagogue 2000 Series. The idea for this sentence derived from the title of this book on Jewish learning.
23. "A Prayer Book for Australia", (1995) The Anglican Church of Australia, Broughton Books, The Dismissal p.144.