

INTRODUCTION- The Book

THE BEGINNING

It has been a womb of a story- a slow but persistent and creative call to action behind the scenes. This book records a personal story as well as describing a learning community focus for Christian Education. The chapters reflect my journey in Christian Education. They are the result of writing a series of articles between 1999 and 2007. My writing on the congregation as a learning community has grown out of my parish experience, reading and reflection. The writing happened intermittently over the years in the midst of the time pressures of a busy parish ministry at St. Saviour's Anglican Church, Glen Osmond, until October 2006. Then, in retirement, I wrote the final two chapters, the introduction and conclusion. These chapters represent the progress in my thinking and practice as a Christian Educator over that period. Hopefully this book will assist you, the reader, to reflect on your journey in Christian Education, your personal story in Christian learning.

In preparing this book I have in mind a readership of adults of all ages, adult leaders, clergy and lay, all who are interested in Christian Education.

Christian Education has to do with the formation and growth of individuals and congregations in their Christian faith, life and ministry, in response to God's sacred presence through Jesus Christ. Disciples of Jesus are learners in the Christian faith and life.

ACCESSIBILITY

The writing in this book is motivated by a search for a Christian Education for all rather than for some or a few (Chapter 1). This is a search for ways of increasing the accessibility of Christian Education. I found myself gradually recognising that for people on a faith journey there are many windows of access to being formed in Christ in our Christian communities, and that the parishes need to acknowledge these different pathways to Christian formation and Christian education (Chapters 2 and 4).

The writing in this book is motivated by a search for ways of connecting faith experience with Christian Education. At the heart of the various approaches to formation and education is the experience of God in our lives, God's movement in our lives helping us to be formed in Christ. Chapter 3 is central to the book's intent and connects Christian Education with the faith experience of God's grace, peace and love in Christ Jesus. In the Christian Education experiences of the learning community, people become deeply aware of God's steadfastness and loving-kindness through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The whole point of the learning community approach is to make Christian Education accessible to each person through a variety of situations. Then people grow in their faith and life in Christ. They reflect on this experience so as to become more and more aware of God's movement in life. They are formed and grow within a Christian community, learning and living the Christian Way, and becoming reflective Christians. The learning community approach to Christian Education enables people from many (all) backgrounds to access and participate with the valued knowledge of the church community in a variety of ways with flexibility enshrined(1).

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES of a Learning Community

I am writing this introduction after having completed the ten chapters. The original articles only slightly adapted have become the chapters of the book. The later chapters

use material from the earlier ones and build upon them. The chapters have been written over a number of years when the understanding of a learning community gradually unfolded. Hindsight would suggest that an overall statement which gathers together and summarises the main features of a Christian Learning Community as understood throughout this book could be useful. Other people who write on the congregation as a learning community have their understandings of the key elements in a learning community (2). My understandings of the distinctive features or key aspects of a learning community thread their way throughout the chapters of the book and are summarised in this section.

In a Christian learning community environment each person is valued as a member of the Body of Christ. Each person of whatever age is a learner. Learners are curious. Each person has abilities/gifts and is encouraged to participate and contribute. Each person also has the right to Christian learning in their own way, with their own style and at their own best pace. To maximise the potential of each learner is paramount. There is a concern for all learners in a congregation. There is a concern for group, congregational and societal learning as well. An educational ministry for the whole congregation is a significant outcome. There is great respect for God. There is great respect for the other person in a Christian learning community where formation, education, ongoing and life-long learning and reflection matter. Spirituality, biblical and theological knowledge and reflection are central for any community of learners (Chapter 8). Individuals and congregations become *reflective learners* (3).

INVESTMENT IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

The investment of time, money and personnel by The Anglican Church of Australia in Christian formation and education in parishes has varied over the years. The priority given to Christian Education in parishes in 2007 varies in congregations, Dioceses and in the national arena (Chapter 8). Recently, in The Diocese of Adelaide, even with budget cuts, there has also been a renewed emphasis on formation and education. Archbishop Jeffrey Driver is encouraging parishes to renew their commitment to teaching the Christian faith (Chapter 10). I hope that this book too may be a means of encouragement to individuals and congregations to learn their faith, ministry and mission, and to teach and make disciples.

THE FUTURE

The terms *learning community* and *learning organisation* are often used by various groupings in our society- business, university, schools. In some organisations leaders may seek to create a learning community without using the terminology but implementing many of the distinctive features. In the Anglican Church the term learning community is used occasionally (Chapter 6). My hope is that the publication of this book will help churches in Australia to use the term and enable them to become more intentional learning communities.

It is a challenge for a leader to assist an existing parish community to become even more an intentional learning community. “Being A Learning Community In a Parish: Recognising How it is and Seeing What it Could Become” is an overarching theme for all the Chapters of this book. However, as the Church continues to create new Christian Communities (fresh expressions and church planting) and to grow new Christians, there is the further challenge of enabling those new congregations to be learning communities too.

1. I wrote this sentence originally after reading material on the knowledge society available from the Australian College of Educators in the *College Year Book* 2003.
2. In Chapter 6 mention is made of publications on the learning community, including, among others, the writing of Dennis Campbell, Norma Cook Everist, Thomas Hawkins, Peter Senge and John Sutcliffe. In Chapter 9 reference is made to the writing of Isa Aron. In addition please note: Clark, David. (1997) “Engaging in mission- the church as a learning organisation” in *Changing World, Unchanging Church: An Agenda for Christians in Public Life*,pp.102-105, Mowbray, London; Marlow, Joe (1995) *Beyond Teaching :The Congregation as a Learning Community*, Christian Education Journal,v.16 (Fall 1995)pp.63-77; Seraphine ,John (1994) *Reworking a Congregation into a Learning Community*, Currents in Theology and Mission, pp.253-266, August 1994 Vol.1 No. 4, Illinois, USA.
3. *ibid.* Clark D. p. 103

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For Individual and Group reflection/discussion.

What have been some of the key stages in your personal story in Christian learning- people who have helped in your Christian formation and some of the main events in your Christian Education journey?

What does the term *learning community* mean for you?

At the end of each chapter there are some suggested questions/statements for individual and group reflection/discussion. These are suggestions only. You may have your own questions and issues to consider.

Some acknowledgements .

Chapters 1-5 were originally available as articles in 2003 on the Uniting Church of Australia national education website www.unitinged.org.au and used with permission.

Chapters 6 and 7 were added to that website in 2004. All these articles were then also on website www.stsavioursgo.net

Chapter 8 was originally published as Chapter 11 in the book *Spiritual Presence* Commemorating 150 years at Glen Osmond, (ed.) W.E.W. Roediger and T.J.H. Littleton, March 2006, Openbook Print, and is used with permission in this book.

Chapter 10 was available in March 2007 on The Anglican Church of Australia General Synod website www.anglican.org.au under National Missions Facilitator.

In the appendix is a publicity flyer. This flyer was distributed in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide by The Archbishop with his Newsletter in March 2007.