

# Reframing Christian Education in an Increasingly Secular Culture

## *From Indoctrination to Inquiry*

### *A Travel Free Learning Article*

By

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As a seminary trained professional Christian educator for the last 30 years I am wondering if I could reframe religious education for this increasingly secular age what would I suggest to local churches, denominations, families, communities and individuals who are seekers or those who are seasoned believers?

What causes me to even explore such a mammoth task? That's pretty easy for me, and maybe threatening to others. To put it simply, research and experience tells me that much of what we have been about in religious education over the past five decades has not worked very well. Millions of meetings, millions of dollars spent, millions of quarterlies and educational resources purchased, millions of prayers prayed, millions of worship encounters engaged, millions of hours of classroom dialogue, millions of DVD's and websites viewed. Now we face countless families broken by severed relationships, not to mention that very few believers' lives are transformed significantly, biblical illiteracy is evident on every turn and worse yet the culture we are experiencing is less and less interested in participating in what we call church.

It would seem something is missing from how we are doing religious education these days, so let's explore this subject. What are the possibilities out there? What is not yet explored? What has worked for us and what has not? What would make it better? Let me propose from the outset that a basic shift for the 21<sup>st</sup> century pluralistic and diverse world might be moving from a focus on indoctrination to a focus on inquiry. Moving from a telling posture, what person's *should* believe and how person's *should* act to an asking posture, providing well discerned and timed coaching questions designed to build deeper ownership of discovered beliefs to the point that lives, families, businesses are transformed from the inside out. Let's dive into these uncharted waters to explore some questions I am pondering.

#### **What if:**

- The purpose was to celebrate, encourage and explore community, affirmation of faith, conversion and character?
- Our desired outcomes had more to do with life transformation than transferring information and inspiration?
- We were more about creating incarnational experiences that perpetuating ecclesiastical tradition?
- We focused more on the remnant (those inquiring and interested) rather than the multitude (those following a habit and expectation)?
- We engaged those interested in missional experiences and structure theological reflection on those experiences rather than focus on institutional attendance patterns?
- We were more intentional about connecting life experiences with theological concepts during teachable moments?
- We created more forums for intergenerational learning opportunities?
- We utilized more technology to facilitate transformational Bible study and faith formation?
- We created faith based learning experiences that work to transform attitudes, character, relationships and faith aptitude?
- We communicated Bible truths when and where they inform understanding of life experiences?
- We created peer learning teams to inform and encourage growth through shared life experiences?

- We incorporated the coach approach for faith formation – moving from telling to asking in classrooms and informal teaching opportunities with all age groups?
- We focused more on how students learn best and then create the most appropriate bible study experience?
- We were intentional about creating and validating seven-day-a-week life-long learning experiences that yields transformation of life?
- We celebrated and modeled, formal and spontaneous, personal and corporate worship that connects personal issues to divine presence and truths?
- We purposely create learning opportunities for diverse issues and people groups looking for God in the midst of experienced diversity?
- We utilized regularly the power of personal, familial, community and biblical storytelling to highlight spiritual truths?

### **What Does This Look Like in Real Life?**

“What would this look like in real life?” is certain to be the first question that pops into the minds of many leaders in the church culture. While I certainly understand the relevancy and power of the question, I also suspect that this is a major part of the problem many churches face in this increasingly secular culture? Our leaders think more in the box than beyond the box. Many think more in the veins of familiarity and comfort than biblical faith and conversion. As an overview let me share some common threads that I suspect would be in the framework and regular experiences.

- Relational
- Formal and Informal
- Spontaneous
- Spiritual Discernment
- Open and Listening
- Reflective
- Asking powerful coaching questions
- Intentional
- Built on inquiry not instruction
- Decentralized and Centralized
- Celebration
- Creating a thirst for spiritual things
- Learning to discern and follow the Spirit
- Life transformation experiences
- Intergenerational Forums
- Mentoring/Coaching Relationships
- Spiritual Life Companions/Life Coaches

Creating an atmosphere of trust, respect, encouragement and inquiry is critical and takes time, prayer, patience, hope and intentionality. Learning to trust the presence of the Spirit, while focusing on creating this atmosphere, is often challenging at best when dealing with skeptical and distrusting believers (often having bad experiences with church) and those with little or no knowledge or respect for God, church or the scriptures.

The following chart is a cursory overview of how I see coaching being a powerful tool kit for shaping relationships, conversations, and creating opportunities that are not intrusive but providing opportunity of exploration. Many, who are searchers, are very open to inquiry that helps them explore options, roadblocks, life pinches and connections in life that create cause for celebration.

**Coach Approach to Discipleship**  
***Moving from Indoctrination to Inquiry***  
***Moving from Telling to Asking***

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Powerful Questions	Spiritual Formation Significance
How would you describe your spiritual life?	Discernment of where they are; awareness of language they use
What's working in your life?	Discernment; celebration
What would make life better for you?	Discern openness; discontent; disconnects and invites exploration of options
What about your spirituality are you challenged by these days?	Clarifies their journey and their gaps
What would help you find greater satisfaction?	Provides insight about next steps/questions
Who are the persons that are impacting your life now?	Explores sources of encouragement, mentoring, discipling, coaching
What makes those persons of significance for you?	Discerns what is valuable to them
Help me understand.	Communicates your openness to learn from them
Tell me more.	Communicates your interest and openness in their journey
What's not working about your spirituality?	Clarifies their gaps
What are the questions you live with/struggle with?	Clarifies their gaps and challenges that may provide coaching opportunities and clarifies priorities
What energizes you about life?	Discerns loyalties
What drains your energy?	Discerns possible barriers that could be explored
How's that working for you?	Invites them to self coach and self evaluate
What would make things better?	Invites them to explore options

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**Important Things to Know**

Eddie Hammett is a Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership. He is a certified coach with the International Coach Federation. Recent books of which he is the author or co-author are *Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60*, *Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age*, and *Making Shifts Without Making Waves*. He is available for speaking and coaching with leaders, congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations. His personal web site is [www.TransformingSolutions.org](http://www.TransformingSolutions.org). His work is also highlighted at [www.cbfnc.org](http://www.cbfnc.org).

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