

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND FORMATION MINISTRY

A Christian never graduates,” claims a long-time member of Towson United Methodist Church in Towson, MD. This congregation has a commitment to life-long learning and this ministry is a holistic one within the entire church. The pastor and lay leadership are engaged, and all ages participate, both in “come” ministries and “go” ministries. They model a vital ministry of Christian education and formation.

A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

One need not look far to find biblical support for religious education. Every Hebrew father was required to teach his child the Law, and as soon as the child could walk and hold his hand, he attended or observed the major festivals. We see this reminder in Deuteronomy 6: “Now this is the commandment...that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe..., so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments...so that your days may be long..., so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as...God... has promised you” (6:1-3).

This charge from God, by way of Moses, indicates not only what they are to do (teach the commandments) but why (so you and your descendants may have a

long, prosperous, and fruitful life). The Commandments we teach are not just a set of rules to be enforced, but guides to an abundant life.

The New Testament offers the best example of all: Jesus, the master teacher. After all the parables, lessons, and personal examples, Jesus paused before his ascension for one last teaching moment: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Again, Jesus offered the What (go, make, baptize, teach) and the Why (to transform the world by making disciples of all the nation).

Knowing that even faithful followers are frail and forgetful, Jesus pledged both spiritual and practical help. In his final meal with his disciples, Jesus made a fantastic promise: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). Lest his disciples waver, he also assured them the “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14:26). The entire Trinity is engaged in helping us fulfill a ministry of religious education for ourselves, our children, and our children’s children.

WHAT DOES VITAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION LOOK LIKE?

First, Christian education and formation is BIG! It includes education, of course: those classes, groups, and activities that teach the Scriptures, the life and times of biblical people, biblical history and tradition, denominational information, doctrine and theology, and other knowledge-based information. Study is vitally important; an ignorant disciple is not a very good disciple.

A Portrait of a Vital Christian

Yet “knowing” or “knowing about” is only part of the whole. Christian education properly includes formation. We are educated for something and to be something—mature Christian disciples. So, a ministry of Christian education includes those relationships, experiences, events, and mystical encounters that shape us as Christians in relationship to God and one another. We forge an identity and cultivate the traits that demonstrate our active, ingrained love of God. We learn the holy habits that develop and sustain us as members of the body of Christ.

The entire Trinity is engaged in helping us fulfill a ministry of religious education for ourselves, our children, and our children’s children.

Members of the household of faith, in age-appropriate ways, will value, learn, and apply the word of God. We will behave in ways that demonstrate a commitment to justice for all people. We will be generous. We will want to serve others and will find ways to do it without thought of reward. We will show patience, forbearance, compassion, and love. In short, we strive to have the mind in us that is in Christ. All of this must be valued, taught, and modeled.

The ministry of Christian education and formation is an important venue for that learning and mentoring.

Vital Educational Ministry

Dan Dick’s research into vital congregations in *Vital Signs*,* revealed similar characteristics in six key areas:

- **Focus:** integrating spiritual, theoretical, and practical knowledge in daily living and Christian service; study of Scripture, theology, cultural and sociological issues highly valued.
- **Commitment:** high level of commitment by majority of congregation to life-long learning; learning and discipleship are closely related.
- **Forum:** small groups, both inside and outside the congregation; formal classes with clear objectives; integrated program.
- **Participation:** widespread throughout entire congregation.
- **Leadership:** interplay of teacher/student role where almost everyone is both; a good deal of outside expertise brought in; majority of congregations see themselves in teaching role.
- **Impact:** high impact; lives changed, hearts transformed; people integrate faith, learning, and daily living.

Congregations do not have to be large or wealthy to be vital. They have to be faithful, thoughtful, intentional, and diligent.

Everything Teaches

All congregations will have some kind of Christian education and formation presence, even if it’s done informally. The question is not whether there is any Christian formational ministry going on, but how well it is being done. EVERYTHING teaches; everything forms us, either positively or negatively.

Teachers, as one might expect, are prominent examples and models for persons who participate in the organized classes and study groups at the church or sponsored by the church. Are they present to welcome people, particularly the children, when they arrive? Are they prepared? Do they create a safe place to be and to bring up important questions? Do they listen? Do they care about their students? Are they present for worship and engaged in service?

Responses to these questions (and many others) speak volumes about the perceived value of Christian education and the people who participate in it. But adults in the classroom are not the only teachers and leaders in a ministry of education and formation. Anyone, of any age, who claims the name of Christ is an example to others about who God is, what God is like, and the life God calls us to lead. We are, after all, created in the image of God. Every Christian's life, as it is lived moment by moment, is a testimony for (or against) the knowledge and practice of the love of God. *Everything teaches.*

THE PASTOR AND EDUCATION

The pastor, including one on a two-point charge who is conducting worship at Church A while Church B is having Sunday school, is a key leader in educational ministry. Sunday school may be "prime time" for Christian education (with over a million people engaged any given Sunday), but it is not the only place where the pastor's participation is helpful.

The Teaching Pastor

The pastoral leader of a congregation, especially in smaller churches where the pastor is the entire staff, is often the only one with a formal theological education. While we as a Church wring our collective hands over the lack of biblical and theological literacy in our congregations, it

seems clear that the person with a theological education should share it in whatever ways are possible. The most obvious way is in leading classes or groups, whether on Sunday morning or other time.

Every Christian's life, as it is lived moment by moment, is a testimony for (or against) the knowledge and practice of the love of God. Everything teaches.

The pastor is limited only by his or her imagination, because everything is a teaching opportunity. At a fellowship dinner? The pastor can offer a biblical/theological explanation for the gathering of the body for nurture. In a meeting? The pastor can spend a moment teaching something of the history and tradition of that area of ministry or offer biblical examples or principles that should undergird it. All that the church does should have a biblical/theological reason, otherwise the church may not need to do it. The pastor can be a front-line teacher and interpreter of this (though it's a good exercise for the laity).

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church specifically charges the pastor to teach parents the meaning and responsibilities of baptism when they bring a child for the sacrament. Further, they are required to teach or to guide the teaching of confirmation for youth and adults. This is not to be taken lightly: "The pastor shall **diligently** instruct the parents or guardians regarding the meaning of this sacrament and the vows they assume" (see ¶216 and ¶226, 2008).

Pastoral leaders will want to instruct persons who wish to join the church by profession of faith or by transfer, particularly from a different denomination. Indeed, the pastor may be the chief repository for all things Wesleyan. John and Charles have

left a marvelous legacy, and that should be shared with persons who unite with a United Methodist congregation.

The Preacher as Teacher

The pastoral leader has an opportunity every week to teach from the pulpit. Responsible preaching relies on sound exegesis, and at least some of that research can make its way into the spoken message. This is the perfect setting in which to introduce not only some of the historical and theological background of the Scriptures, but of the elements of worship as well.

The liturgy is intended to illuminate the flow of influence and response of the congregation as they receive, incorporate, and respond to God's presence. When the elements of the liturgy are "unpacked" and the congregation is taught what each part of the worship service is to do and why we do it, they are more engaged as participants. (Worship is not a "spectator sport!") Learning the flow of the Christian year and its parallels with the life and ministry of Jesus enhances the worship experience, and the congregation is much more likely to know and understand this if the pastor is deliberate about teaching it. One result is more enlightened worshippers. Another is disciples who are better able to integrate the life and ministry of Christ with their own education and ministry.

Pastoral Leader as Advocate

Teaching is a skill and a gift that is not universal (though it behooves the pastor to develop teaching skills). Pastors can certainly bring their biblical/theological expertise into a partnership with someone more gifted in teaching.

Even if the pastoral leader never gets directly involved in a small group or class, he or she can and should be the number one advocate for those who do teach and

lead groups. What the pastoral leader values, the congregation is likely to value.

The pulpit may be the most effective forum for promoting the value and practice of Christian education and formation. Pleading from the pulpit for teachers and helpers is generally an ineffective method of swelling the ranks of teachers, but the pulpit is an ideal place to celebrate the ministry of Christian education and formation. Regular updates or comments on the wonderful things that are happening in classes and groups tell the congregation as a whole that their children, youth, and adults are being nurtured in the faith and how that is happening.

The pastoral leader can and should be the number one advocate for those who do teach and lead groups. What the pastoral leader values, the congregation is likely to value.

Consecrating the teachers and small group leaders each year at an appropriate time (such as the beginning of the school year) highlights the importance of Christian education and the people who lead it. Christian Education Week* includes articles, worship resources, a consecration liturgy, workshop, and a list of resources to support congregational awareness of this ministry.

Vitality Supported by the Pastor

Recall the key areas for vitality: focus, commitment, forum, participation, leadership, and impact. The pastor's participation in and advocacy for effective Christian education is crucial. Worship time and class or group time can be planned to form an integrated whole, linking focus and forum so that themes and lessons in the curriculum are supported by what happens in worship. The expectation

voiced from the pulpit (and the church council, committees, and other venues) that all persons should study and grow encourages a congregational value of life-long learning and lifts up participation as a necessary practice. The pastor's personal involvement in leadership and as an advocate for other leaders creates a supportive community within which all the leaders can develop further skill and expertise. Being intentional and thoughtful about a whole-congregation involvement opens the door to a greater possibility of lives formed and transformed.

LAY LEADERSHIP

While much has been said so far about the involvement of the pastoral leader, clearly he or she is just one person. The ministry of Christian education relies on many more laypersons for all the classes and groups offered.

Equipping the Saints

If the congregation is serious about vital ministry in general and vital Christian education and formation ministry in particular, it must also value appropriate training of its teachers and leaders.

Congregational leaders in education must define the requirements, equip their teachers and group leaders for the task, and expect them to participate in training. When the infrastructure is strong before people are recruited, the assurance of help is a gift, not an

In a short study of congregational Christian education practices,* it was discovered that while most of the churches had clear expectations of the teacher in the classroom (be on time, be prepared, know the age group, be theologically responsible), not so many stated expectations about the character or practices of the

teacher otherwise. Perhaps that was assumed, but only a few specifically stated that teachers or group leaders were also expected to attend worship, practice the spiritual disciplines (at least) of prayer and personal study of the Scriptures, participate in regular training and support groups, and otherwise demonstrate the marks of mature discipleship. If these entirely reasonable requirements are expected of the teacher, the teacher should expect the church to provide a means to fulfill them.

To do so, you need a supportive infrastructure in place. Persons invited to teach will have significant influence with the children and youth of the congregation. They want to know what is expected of them (both inside and outside the classroom) and what support is available. Congregational leaders in education must define the requirements, equip their teachers and group leaders for the task, and expect them to participate in training as a condition of their acceptance. When the infrastructure is strong *before* people are recruited, the assurance of help is a gift, not an empty promise.

SMALL GROUPS

Vital ministry depends on the intimacy that small groups, including classes, offer. Experiential worship is essential, but by its nature, does not afford the opportunity for the personal, real-time give-and-take interchange of a small group in a safe place.

Every congregation has small groups; some of them *are* a small group. Think broadly about "small group"—it can be any group that is small, not just a group formed for the practice of spiritual disciplines. That means that the choir, or the Finance committee, or the Wednesday night knitters, or the Saturday morning aerobics class could all be a part of a small group ministry. Any group, not just

the Sunday school or mid-week classes, offers an opportunity for faith development and disciple making. Any group can be an entry point to the church, the denomination, and/or to the Christian faith.

Adopting an Expansive View

Rather than expect groups to change, encourage them to think more expansively about themselves. The knitters may also pray for anyone who will receive what they make. The choir may also engage in a brief reflection time on the text of the anthems and hymns so that the theological import of the music seeps into their souls. The aerobics group may use contemporary Christian music so that they hear the Word while they exercise.

How can you assess what impact various practices, relationships, and experiences have on your participants?

In addition to keeping an expansive view, small groups will work together systematically. Group leaders and teachers will be aware of how people come and go through this system. This is easiest in the class structure for children who logically progress from one grade to the next. Ideally, the elementary and teen teachers and group leaders understand what is needed to help prepare students to make the transitions from one age-level to the next and talk and plan with one another for a seamless process.

Of course, real life is not like that, and it only accounts for a portion of the participants in a congregation where everyone is expected and encouraged to engage in life-long learning. The system needs to attend to what adults need to help them continue growing in the faith so that there are opportunities for people all along the faith development continuum. In addition,

the system must consider not just “us” but those who are not yet “us” or who may never be “us,” yet can be participants in or beneficiaries of the church’s ministry.

ESTABLISHING MEASURES

If vital congregations are thoughtful and intentional concerning the focus, commitment, forum, participation, leadership, and impact of their ministry of Christian education and formation, then they have identified a way to measure it. Quantitative measures—how many people attend classes, VBS, or DISCIPLE Bible Study—is one measure, but numbers are only a small part of the answer. Numbers do not tell us what is actually happening to the people who do come.

Vision and Goals, Then Measures

Before measurement must come an understanding of the results you want. First, the vision. If our ministry of Christian education and formation is producing the fruits that please God, what does that look like? So, we return to the image of the mature, faithful disciple mentioned earlier. That’s what we want to accomplish; that’s who and what we want people to become.

Then, *who do we need to be, what kind of environment must we create, and what do we need to do* to have a sustainable, fruit-producing ministry that, in partnership with God, makes disciples of Jesus Christ who can transform the world? (Remember- “greater things than these will you do...”?) The strategies come next. The measures are based on the strategies. In what specific ways were the strategies effective or not? In what particular ways can you determine if people are growing in their own discipleship? How can you assess what impact various practices, relationships, and experiences have on congregational members?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND PRACTICAL HELPS

Use these questions and activities to engage your church leaders in reflection and action toward congregational vitality.

A Theological Foundation

1. Use a Bible concordance to find passages that refer to teaching or instruction in the biblical community.
 - ✚ What is the overall value placed on instruction?
 - ✚ What is the purpose of the instruction? The expected results?
 - ✚ How well are these values taught and practiced in your congregation?

Vital Christian Education Ministry

2. In small groups of two or three, give each group a different activity related to all the different things that go on during an average Sunday in your church. Discuss these questions in the small group, then come together to share insights.
 - ✚ What evidence do you see for the six key areas of vital ministry: focus, commitment, forum, participation, leadership, and impact?
 - ✚ If everything teaches, what is being taught in your activity? What is missing? What would you like to be different?

The Pastor and Education

3. The pastoral leader is, or can be, a key leader in Christian education. List current areas in which the pastor can teach or advocate for a Christian education ministry.
 - ✚ No pastor can do everything or be everywhere, so how would you prioritize these areas? How can the congregation assist?
 - ✚ What opportunities are afforded the pastoral leader to continue his or her own education and development? How does (might) this opportunity enhance the pastor's role as educator?

Lay Leadership

4. Appoint a small group to assess the infrastructure into which persons are invited for leadership.
 - ✚ Are opportunities for personal, spiritual growth in place? For specific training in teaching or leading groups?
 - ✚ Do you have a job description approved by the church council that helps teachers and education leaders understand what is expected of them and what they can expect? If not, select a small group to work on them.

Small Groups

5. Discuss these questions:
 - ✚ If every small group is a potential place of faith formation and disciple making, how might you encourage existing groups to hold this view?
 - ✚ What is the system that holds your classes and groups together? How might it be done more systematically and with specific goals?

Establishing Measures

6. Distribute copies of *(The First) 80 Guiding Questions to Assess the Education Ministry of the Church*.^{*} Assign a different segment to persons or small groups.
 - ✚ How well do you do with the questions raised in your segment?
 - ✚ How might these ideas help you establish specific measures for your ministry?

RESOURCES

**Christian Education Week* is a free, downloadable resource published each year by the General Board of Discipleship to support the annual emphasis of Christian Education Sunday. This day is one of the officially recognized Sundays within the United Methodist calendar, but the date is determined by each annual conference. CEW is available early in the year, usually posted to the GBOD website in March. ([The 2010 issue](#))

**Congregational Christian Education Practices*: For more information and a series of reflection questions for the congregation's Christian education ministry, see the study report [Survey on Basic Christian Education in the Local Church](#).

**Vital Signs: A Pathway to Congregational Wholeness*, by Dan R. Dick. Nashville: Discipleship Resources © 2007. ISBN 978-0-88177-495-5. The chart on pages 142-143, produced here in part, provides a summary of findings related to Christian education for each of the four types of congregations identified in his research.

*[\(The First\) 80 Guiding Questions to Assess the Education Ministry of the Church](#)

[Foundations](#) summarizes the theological statement of The United Methodist Church in regard to Christian education. It is prepared by the staff at the General Board of Discipleship.

Writer in this issue:

- * Diana Hynson, Director of Learning and Teaching Ministries; dhynson@gbod.org



This pamphlet is prepared by the Leadership Ministry Division at the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church and may be reprinted for use in the local church © 2011 GBOD.

For more information about the needs and requirements in specific ministry areas, see the leadership series *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation*, which includes

* Christian Education	* Small Group Ministry
* Evangelism	* Stewardship
* Finance	* Worship

Go to www.cokesbury.com or call 1-800-672-1789.

Visit our websites:

- * www.gbod.org/education
- * www.gbod.org/evangelism
- * www.gbod.org/stewardship
- * www.gbod.org/worship