

The Church as Learning Community

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*A Comprehensive Guide
to Christian Education*

Norma Cook Everist



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THE CHURCH AS LEARNING COMMUNITY
A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In appreciation of

*Marie Schalekamp
Gaylord Noyce and
William Weiblen*

for their invitations to teach

CONTENTS



Figures	8
Preface	9

PART I: GATHERED TO LEARN

1. A Community of Teachers and Learners	21
2. Creating Effective Learning Environments to Be Different Together	61
3. Eight Facets of Learning: Methodologies for a Diverse People	103

PART II: CHALLENGED TO GROW

4. Lifelong Learning in the Faith Community	151
5. The Congregation as Confirming Community	195
6. Equipping the People for Their Teaching Task	223

PART III: SENT TO SERVE

7. From Learning to Mission to Learning	257
8. Connecting the Learning Community with Vocation in the Public World	289
9. Parish Education in a Pluralistic World	317
Notes	349

FIGURES



Figure 1	Cube 27: An Assessment Tool	50
Figure 2	Learning Arenas Grounded in the Creed	93
Figure 3	Eight Facets of Learning	104
Figure 4	Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle	154
Figure 4B	Developmental Stages of Children and Youth	173
Figure 5	Three Confirming Community Models	208
Figure 6	Six Stages of Planning	230
Figure 7	The Learning Leads to Mission Spiral	262
Figure 8	Religious Education Arenas in Daily Life	292
Figure 9	Parish Education in a Pluralistic World	344

PREFACE



John Wesley said not to make the parish your world but to make the world your parish.¹ This book poses many questions related to that statement. “What is the task of the faith community when we assume that the curriculum is the entirety of the world in which we live?” “How can we equip each person in the Christian learning community to become a teacher and a learner?” The world challenges us: “How do we deal with diversity in a pluralistic culture?” “How can religious educators lead faith communities in growth and clarity of identity and mission, to live hospitably in a culture of many faiths?”

In a time when many appear apathetic toward education in the church, religious leaders grow weary. No one has time to teach; our imaginations wither. What if we could expand the horizons of our teaching/learning endeavor? How differently would we set about our task if we believed that everyone in the faith community is already a teacher and a learner? In a culture that nearly worships individualism, people still hunger for values and communities of meaning. Religious educators grow frustrated that people seem to be looking everywhere but to the church for identity, continuity, and challenge. And yet on September 11, 2001, after terrorist attacks killed thousands of people from many countries around the world in New York City, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania, people knew where to find houses of worship. The faith community’s curriculum is much more than material on paper to be read and recited; it embraces all of the people in this time and context as well as people in God’s global and historic community. People need to understand one another and one another’s faith. The entire parish is already a learning community. To broaden our concept of the church as learning community will challenge us, but need not overwhelm us.

We use “church” in this book in its broadest universal sense, and also in its local reality. Universally, the church as a learning community includes all those members of the body of Christ historically and globally. Locally, the learning community includes not only people gathered in the church building on Sunday, but all the arenas of their daily lives all week long. “Congregation” refers to the organized entity of the local church. We use “parish” in this book to mean the entire “neighborhood” of a faith community, whether that be a few city blocks or an entire county. Education is parish education if one sees that teaching as a complex series of interactions. It involves not only the teacher and the learners and the subject matter, but also our environment and all of the people who touch our lives throughout the entire week. With this perspective, even with limited budgets, a congregation is never without potential learning resources. As we explore learning communities we will see that in some regards an entire church body, the nation, and the globe itself are all one’s parish. While taking this broad view, we shall maintain a focus on specific application to the local congregation as it strives faithfully to carry out its religious educational ministry task.

The goal of education is to facilitate learning experiences. This book does not debate doctrine, nor does it engage in extensive biblical exegesis. It does not present a history of the church. If one begins and ends with biblical and theological content, the educational process is seen merely as the delivery system for doctrine. But to focus on the whole faith community is to present a holistic ecclesiology of religious education. This book presumes that the way we teach teaches as powerfully as what we teach. Method is extraordinarily formative and has lifelong consequences. To begin from the perspective of community and educational method is to raise theological questions inductively.

Sometimes religious educators in the congregation feel they cannot teach because students won’t sit still long enough to absorb biblical “truth.” But that is to slip back into the view of theology as merely content. Likewise professors of religious education at colleges, universities, and seminaries may feel their subject is treated as merely a delivery system for the other “real” subjects of Bible and theology. That, too, misses the concept that religious education is itself a challenging intellectual discipline, raising profound reli-

gious and theological issues. In either case, we miss the questions of the encounter itself.

In this book we shall focus on the act of teaching, the procedures we use, and the realities of the learning environment. We shall continually look at the people, at what is going on in their lives, and seek to help religious educators in their task of shaping educational encounters. We will provide practical examples to instruct readers in fully utilizing their own context. How do we measure learning encounters which engage as resource all members of a faith community and the entire parish? Although we engage in formative and summative evaluation of the religious education activity, evaluation does not conclude at the end of the session; it begins there, taking us full circle out into the parish community. “Feedback” comes when the faith we have been fed feeds back to the worlds in which people embody the faith in their mission and ministry in daily life.

The nine chapters flow from inward to outward, safety to risk, identity to mission, beginning in the basic community of faith yet always mindful of our connections with the daily world where parishioners live. Community themes from the New Testament epistles and stories from American congregational life punctuate the discussion.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this book is threefold: to put forth a vision of the entire parish as a learning community; to help faith communities create and maintain learning environments that facilitate us being different together in a pluralistic world; and to provide a comprehensive guide for religious educators leading a congregation toward fully becoming a learning community. The book provides resources for many types of religious educators: directors of religious education, pastors, lay leaders, and those preparing for these vocations in college, divinity school, or seminary. The book might be used by the reader for individual growth. A group of religious educators in a congregation could read this book together chapter by chapter as part of their ongoing teaching enrichment. The book

may serve as a text in college or seminary classroom or in a lay school of religion. The intention is to provide a comprehensive theoretical approach to religious education with practical application.

I write from a Christian perspective; however, in keeping with one goal of this book—to create safe places for us to be different together—I trust religious educators from many faith traditions might find parts of this book useful. One thesis of this book is that in a pluralistic culture we come together in more authentic, healthy, and helpful ways when we come in our particularity. When, through knowing and practicing our own faith traditions well, we are secure in our own religious identity, we are more able to learn about the faith traditions of others, and unafraid to receive and respect each other in our differences. We will need to do so if we are going to be able to live together in the global community. We therefore encourage readers to use this book in ecumenical and interfaith groups.

LITERARY STYLE

The theme of the church as a learning community is present throughout the book, but each chapter becomes an entity unto itself, not only in specific topic, but also in style. Just as I advocate using a variety of methods in teaching, each to be congruent with the subject, goals, and setting of a session, so I purposely use many different styles of writing within the various chapters. Readers, like participants in a class, enjoy and learn better through some methods than others and are invited to engage these various styles, perhaps stretching beyond their own favorites, just as one would challenge the people in one's own learning community.

The book presents stories, descriptions of individuals and faith communities, questions for reflection, discussion, case study, and accounts of expeditionary learning, as well as the more familiar literary mode of didactic presentation of theory. For example, chapter 1 uses stories and questions for reflection. It begins with a seemingly mundane—but true—story of a bus to show how broad the scope of “learning community” can be. Later, the reader will discover that chapter 4 presents developmental theories, but moves quickly into examples of actual people at various stages of the life cycle. Chapter

5 gives models for confirming community, but also an extensive case study of an actual community struggling toward change. In chapter 9 one finds some history, setting the background for exploration of religious education's place and vocation in a pluralistic culture.

The New Testament epistles provide one constant thread throughout the book. The biblical material appears at differing places within chapters and has a greater or lesser role, just as in a religious education event one may begin with Scripture, weave it throughout the session using various methods, or conclude a discussion forum with a text. The biblical material is not presented to provide a specific reference for religious educational theory, and certainly not as a proof text, but more as a conversation partner from the early church's life together in community.

Throughout the book the reader will find invitations to reflect on the principles as they apply to the reader's specific context, whether that be small or large congregation, rural, urban or suburban parish, old or young, an established or transitory community. I have served in a wide range of such communities, but do not presume to know the readers' specific context. We are always called to teach beyond our personal experience; therefore, I write intending no one to find himself or herself outside the perimeters of this book. That is congruent with another thesis of the book—no one is outside the boundaries of a parish learning community. Readers are not only invited but strongly urged to be conversation partners with the author, bringing their rich and diverse backgrounds to the text. Individuals and religious education communities will find not only theory, but also reflection and discussion opportunities integrated with each chapter, with suggested approaches and strategies to analyze, challenge, and guide. Footnotes, congruent with the book's premise that resources for religious education are from a broad array of sources, are intended not only as references but for further exploration.

PART ONE: GATHERED TO LEARN

The entire parish community becomes teacher and learner to one another, whether or not a faith community truly realizes it. Each

person is growing and changing—cognitively, affectively, physically, psychologically, and existentially in one’s specific context. The faith community is greater than a quantitative collection of individuals. We need to explore that potential and create healthy places for us to come together in our diversity. Once such hospitable boundaries are set and maintained, we can use a vast variety of methods to engage people in learning at their growing edges.

Chapter 1, “A Community of Teachers and Learners,” builds on the premise that while the church is universal, historically and globally, it is also always local. We shall reflect upon the people—all people—present in the parish community. We look in unlikely places where people gather regularly and do teach and learn with one another, however informally. An extensive reflection on 1 Corinthians provides material for re-membering the body of Christ. After considering what it means to know and be known, we provide strategies for expanding the range of teachers within the parish. Building on the definition of curriculum as “God and God’s people in this time and place” (with all else being curriculum resource), we present two tools, one for assessing learning opportunities in the congregation and one for reviewing curriculum resources. The chapter concludes with an emphasis on mutual accountability for the teaching task.

Chapter 2, “Creating Effective Learning Environments to Be Different Together,” considers the importance of setting and maintaining a hospitable balance of structure and spirit within the community. Learning environments include the entire range of settings, from family and classroom to neighborhood, nation, and the global village. In order for religious educators to facilitate an effective teaching/learning encounter, they need to first of all use their teaching authority to set safe, trustworthy, and healthy boundaries. We consider the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of the learning environment as well as issues of authority, time, and relationships. We devote an entire chapter to learning environments because if they are not effectively tended, very little positive learning will occur. Colossians and the Creeds ground the topic of creating trustworthy learning environments.

Chapter 3, “Eight Facets of Learning: Methodologies for a Diverse People,” examines the fascinating differences among peo-

ple in the ways they learn. In a healthy learning environment, teachers will be able to use any number of methods well. In this chapter, readers can explore methods which are already their basic, preferred approaches, and can also stretch to new possibilities. The eight general categories that will be explored in chapter 3 are: community, presentation, discussion, study, individual, confrontation, experience, and reflection. By becoming adept at using the entire range, teachers can choose methods not merely on the basis of those with which they feel comfortable, but according to age-appropriateness and, most important, in congruence with teaching goals and content. The chapter provides brief examples of the combination of methods and touches on “minds ready for action” in 1 Peter.

PART TWO: CHALLENGED TO GROW

With the community gathered, the learning environment set, learning can take place. The local faith community holds in its hands a comprehensive task, spanning the entire life cycle and encompassing the entire congregation with its surrounding parish. The teaching church will need to be equipped for this challenge; therefore, religious educators will want to grow in their leadership skills.

Chapter 4, “Lifelong Learning in the Faith Community,” surveys the life cycle and stages of faith. While continuing to be in the community, each individual needs opportunities to grow at his or her learning edge. The chapter sketches basic developmental theories and moves quickly to descriptions of specific individuals at various places in the life cycle. First John’s emphasis on Christ’s abiding presence accentuates God’s unchanging nature in the midst of people’s growth and development. Chapter 4 concludes with three session plans (incorporating methods outlined in chapter 3), using one basic text to show how religious educators might help learners engage biblical material at different stages of the life cycle.

Chapter 5, “The Congregation as a Confirming Community,” presumes that the entire congregation is charged with confirmation ministry. The chapter uses the book of Romans to explore the

nature of growth in faith. Congregations are called not to merely nurture their own, but to be engaged in outreach. In living their faith, people also confirm what they believe, individually and as a community. Three examples of confirming community models are followed by a longer case study of actual small congregations going through a process of growth in claiming and carrying out its confirming ministry.

Chapter 6, “Equipping the People for Their Teaching Task,” presents a number of specific tools for helping develop and strengthen leadership within the church. Building on the concept of equipping the saints in Ephesians, the chapter explores using each one’s gifts to build up the body of Christ. The chapter examines people’s different perspectives of planning, and delineates six specific planning stages. The chapter presents a plan for ongoing teacher education. Religious educators are encouraged to reflect leadership, power, and partnership, and to lead with vision.

PART THREE: SENT TO SERVE

The congregation’s attention moves outside the doors of the building into its mission in the world. Parish educational ministry needs consistently to be engaged in arenas of daily life, not just as an afterthought or “product” of the educational endeavor. Religious education arises from and results in Christian vocation in a pluralistic world.

Chapter 7, “From Learning to Mission to Learning,” explores the symbiotic relationship of learning and mission. Moving beyond a limited view of evaluation that focuses merely on “teaching effectiveness,” we assess the learners’ own abilities to understand, to incorporate learnings, and, even further, to be able to carry out their vocations of discipleship in the worlds where they live. Learning actually begins in the many “missions” in which people are already engaged, so this chapter presents strategies for beginning with the daily experiences of people living in a pluralistic society. We shall see stories of three faith communities re-examining their goals. We then provide two methods of theological reflection. The chapter concludes with that little-used epistle, James.

Chapter 8, “Connecting the Learning Community with Vocation in the Public World,” builds on chapter 7, using images which lay a theoretical basis for incorporating people’s ministry in daily life into religious education. We briefly explore the nature of the church. Congregations often assume they should teach children, so as adults they can then live the faith; children, too, are ministers. Hebrews, an epistle written for those “inside” a religious community, surprisingly moves the reader “outside the camp.” The chapter includes more methods for helping people connect their faith and daily life. As in chapter 4, true stories prompt reflection, this time on the links between daily ministry and learning.

Chapter 9, “Parish Education in a Pluralistic World,” looks at the competitors for one’s fidelity to one’s belief in action. It traces the history of American civil religion as the “other faith,” which has a powerful formative influence in the lives of all who have grown up in this nation. The chapter takes a look at the public school with its unstated but presumed role to shape a people by inculcating the civil faith. The chapter concludes with the paradox of pluralism: a faith community can take its appropriate place in the parish and in the nation not by being less of who it is, but by being more clear in its identity. Rooted and grounded educationally, people are equipped to be open to learn from other faith communities.

APPRECIATION

I bring to this work forty years of being a religious educator shaped by the people I have been privileged to teach. During seventeen years serving congregations—large and small, thriving and struggling, inner city and suburban—and many more years of speaking at religious education conferences and workshops across the country, I have interacted with and learned from thousands of people. They always have taught me one more new insight or nuanced a theory I held. Thank you to all.

I am grateful to teaching colleagues both at Yale Divinity School, (where I first became involved with professional colleagues in the Religious Education Association and the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education), and, for the past twenty-

three years, at Wartburg Theological Seminary. Healthy partnership in education is a joy! I am grateful to be able to interrelate with students; I draw on their energy and creativity. One never teaches the same “lesson” twice, because the community is always new. I continue to learn from them as they go forth to serve in church and society.

At home, I wish to express my appreciation to those who provide continuity in my life, and therefore are very formative teachers: my family, particularly husband, Burton; sons, Mark, Joel, and Kirk; daughters-in-law, Rachel and Rebecca; and grandson, Gwydion Drew. Thank you for faithful love and companionship on the journey.

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