

IN PRAISE OF LEARNING



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In Praise of Learning

INTRODUCTION

If you want to know how people come to understand and appreciate the Christian faith, whom would you ask? This book is based on the assumption that it is a good idea to ask the learners. Some years ago, that was done on a systematic basis among United Methodists and a few of other denominational affiliations

We asked children, youth, adults of all ages and patterns of involvement in church life, teachers, parents, grandparents and church leaders such as Christian educators and pastors, "how did you learn that which is of central importance to you in your faith?"

We encouraged them to think about informal as well as formal learning settings. We encouraged them to think about key people. We encouraged them to tell us the details. We listened and reflected on what we heard and produced a book titled *In Praise of Learning*. The research and publishing was under the auspices of the GCOM. They have given us permission to use the contents of that out of print book in this new version.

The review process led to the identification of important themes that appeared in the descriptions, using repetition and centrality as the criteria. Those themes have become the basic threads of this book. Around them, we have constructed the statements that comprise the sections.

The Objectives of the Book

It became clear that a significant contribution to Christian education could take place if we could persuade others to take the time to listen carefully to the learners with whom they work. What is stated in the book is not intended to be prescriptive. Rather, by reading about these interviews and the themes and seeing how the authors speculate on their significance, it is hoped that many others will explore their own settings, find their own themes, and draw their own conclusions.

We felt a need to point out the importance as well as the complexity of learner behavior. How people learn is seen to be of fundamental importance in education decision-making and teaching. While learning theory, with its base in psychology, is of use in answering this question, the pattern of learner behavior is more complex than learning theory is intended to comprehend.

Learning is a pattern of behavior as well as a process of the mind. It involves things like to whom one listens, what one reads, how one views the teacher, as well as how much insight and reinforcement one gains. Learning is a pattern of habits and preferences and motivation as well as memorization and model imitation.

It is not enough to know generalities about learning based on developmental schemes or broad surveys. So much more is gained by paying attention to individuals as they tell about their idiosyncratic patterns.

A similar rationale motivated the interviewing on which this book is based. We have projected that it is of critical importance to see the learning that goes on in and around the church from the point of view of the learners. We do want to avoid interpretations that tend to obscure the unique style of each learner. In the text that follows, you will, of course, find generalizations, but it is hoped that the original intent to focus on the unique individual will not be lost. It is for that reason that we encourage you to do your own on-site listening.

It is the richness of variation among learners that is both the problem and the promise of making decisions about education in the church. We must face the variations among people as learners and respond to their individuality of style, while at the same time attempting to make decisions that will serve groups of people. This tension between individuality and group programming will lead us to relevant education if we will take the time to listen to learners as they describe their styles and take those descriptions seriously.

How to Read This Book

The book begins with an exposition of the identifiable themes from the interview research. Sections, or separate booklets addressed to five specific audiences follow. The book concludes with a suggested way to consider learning which takes place in your particular situation. Called ESFI, it encourages a thorough examination of the myriad of ways learning takes place as people grow in community with one another, and with a chapter devoted to listening. We suggest that you read the first section on themes, then the section that most centrally includes you, then the last sections on ESFI and listening. Then we invite you, if inclined, to read sections that are addressed to others.

We suggest you read with the hope of finding yourself described in part, but not fully. Read with these questions in your mind: How am I the same and yet different in my learning style? How do the learners I work with fit this pattern? As you become conscious of your style and that of others in your context, your sensitivity to learners is increased.

What to Do After Reading This Book

Our fondest hope will be fulfilled if those who read the book then will engage in their own research. One form of that research can be to sit down with one person and invite that person to describe as fully as possible his or her learning process.

Others may conduct an introspective research project by putting down for themselves a description of their own learning style. For many people the process of learning is so much a part of their lives that they are not very conscious of it.

Some may find the time and see the importance of talking to a larger group of people, a selected and perhaps representative cross section of the learners they find in and around the formal and intentional learning experiences of their church.

If your experience is like ours, you will find yourself rediscovering the obvious far more often than coming across the brand new and unknown. However, you will also find that the "obvious" is given new vitality and will become a firm new base for decisions about what to do in the teaching/learning ministry of the church.

We listened. We listened to people as they told us about the ways they learn. Women and men, adults and children, teachers and teen-agers, pastors and educators, blacks and whites and people of other races.

We listened to the great variety of styles and common themes as the open conversations filled the hour. People talked about this topic even though it was a puzzling issue. They talked with a sincerity, energy, and openness that surprised us. They talked with a hunger to be heard. One woman said:

"I'd like to be in a class that maybe I could say something that somebody would listen to. They don't really seem to be too interested in what I have to say."

That hunger to be heard is one of the things we learned about their learning. They commented too frequently for chance about how much they had learned by talking to us. A teen-ager commented,

"This interview may be another way of God trying to remind me that he's still around and he still wants me."

And an inactive man said:

"You see it's very seldom that you get an opportunity to sit down and talk about this sort of thing. . . . But I think as a result of this I feel that probably, maybe not the very next time that you see me, but I think I'm going to do some serious thinking about joining a church."

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THEMES OF LEARNING STYLE **Listening, Wisdom Sharing, Learning for Living's Sake**

The people who talked to us said that the church can do something very valuable for learners by providing them with the time and space and a person to listen to what they have to say. **Listening** is one of the major themes to be addressed in this book. It will be mentioned many times.

As we listened we found ourselves discovering the obvious. It is not news to learn that for many of those we listened to, caring persons have been a major part of their most significant times of learning. An adult recalled:

*"It's the Sunday school teacher who takes the time to care with children.
So often I have forgotten so many of the things that I learned,
but I never forgot the teachers that cared."*

What was fresh about this well-known facet of learning was the quiet emotional intensity that surrounded the memories of those caring persons. These shared memories made the obvious fact that caring attitudes are important even clearer.

Caring persons, who were in the lives of our learners long enough and/or deeply enough for that care to become known and trusted, became sources of knowledge. They became models of truth; they became sources of information; they provided wisdom. The learners learned because of that caring relationship. Hearing learners describe these real people had a strong impact.

Wisdom

Wisdom from wise people was another theme in what we heard. A surprising number of times our learners would describe a person, a grandparent, a neighbor, or a Sunday school teacher, and tell us some bit of wisdom they learned from that person and still remembered as a key to life.

Other times it was a memory of a longer relationship to a wise person. A pastor recalled:

"One of the real reasons that I'm in the ministry is that when I was a teen-ager in high school, my Sunday school teacher-she was not brilliantly educated but she really understood life-this lady gave us so much through the high school years."

We noticed that those bits of wisdom sometimes were very small capsules of truth to the point of being trite.

"He never puts more on you than you can bear."

"The Bible says that God takes care of babies and fools."

"The normal part of your life will be back."

“God gives you the strength for the day.”

*“In all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct your paths –
That's one you can say over and over every day.”*

As we mused over this, one of us suggested that those sayings were more important as tags for whole relationships than as little lessons. The sayings were ways of recalling those people and the times of being with them. The church can help people learn by encouraging wise people to share themselves, particularly with children.

We heard our learners talk time and again about the lasting influence of learning that took place when they were young children:

“It's amazing what you can use that you learned when you were in second and third grade. I always felt like I really didn't know much. I mean I feel like I don't know very much about the Bible, but when I started preparing I found that I knew more than I thought.”

You already know this, too, as a dependable generality. What you may find as interesting as we did is that people can and will describe moments in that span of life with loving care.

Learning for Living's Sake

It is not clear when this next thematic pattern begins in the learning process, but the motivation for learning in many adults is a rather ordinary and simple desire to live their daily lives in a Christian manner. People learn in order to handle the daily routine of life. They also learn in order to resolve the focused crisis moments. Sometimes they learn out of simple curiosity, but learning for learning's sake takes a back seat to learning for living's sake.

Here is one "confession" about motivation for learning:

“I don't tend to concentrate on something unless I see a need in myself for doing it. Is there an empty spot that needs to be filled? . . . I'm the one who sounds crassly selfish, what's in it for me? But I know why I attended those seminars and worked on it-boy, as hard as I have ever worked-because I could see right away that they were going to make some changes for me that I just had to have or I wouldn't have survived.”

Perhaps it is the way in which the daily life is so involving that puts it at the front among motivation patterns. People told us how important it was to them to be involved in order to learn. For some this took the form of involvement in classroom activity. For many it was the job they were asked to do in the church or community that provoked their learning. Children described choirs and worship roles and plays and concerts as bright moments of learning. Looking back from a distance of many years an adult reflected,

"I enjoy the memories of Children's Day, when we were little, when we used to go and say a piece."

The learners we listened to seemed to be ad hoc utilitarians. They learned what they needed to know in order to do something. We did not hear many people describe a steady progression in learning. The patterns were more spasmodic and, frankly, erratic. This pattern may be somewhat upsetting to those who have to plan education for others, but it is characteristic of learners.

The learners we listened to were not unhappy about their learning patterns or about their knowledge. Oh yes, many of them "guessed they could always learn some more about the Bible," but they were not, for the most part, disappointed with themselves or the church as far as teaching and learning goes.

When you listen you may hear a different story, but even the inactive people who talked to us were not carrying a grudge about the church's teaching ministry. In what struck us as somewhat childlike, adults learned from the feeling of the atmosphere and aroma of the climate. Learners are shaped and molded more often than they are taught.

The Need for Simplification

Another way to say what is described in the preceding paragraphs is that learners approach this task of learning in a non-technical mind set. We began to speculate that a good part of the nostalgia we heard was based on an unarticulated desire to simplify teaching and learning. Education may be in an awkward stage of development: knowing too much about learning and developmental patterns and other technical insight just to teach; and knowing too little about the significance of those insights to go beyond them with a renewed and more profound simplicity.

We did not find learners coming to the education process with high expectations that they would be changed, especially not radically changed. That may present something of a challenge too, since our culture places a heavy change agenda on the education process. We teach, some say, in order to change people and change society. We are rather confident we have a lot of learners on our side when we say that that expectation is a case of misplaced function. Being changed is not high on learners' expectation list.

This is not all that we heard as we listened to these people in church settings, rural and urban and suburban, large and small. These are some of the major recurring themes. We also heard how people differ from one another in their learning patterns. Even the recurring themes are put together in unique patterns, person after person.

We heard learners talk about

- the influence of caring persons
- the significance of their early years
- how wise people shared wisdom
- the importance of involvement
- that consistency of presence which helped learners in role modeling

- the dailiness of life and other ordinary moments as motivators
- the way learning comes in bursts as caused by specific needs
- how adults and children and those in between continue in a lifelong pattern of learning by absorbing the environment
- a nostalgia for a time when learning was straightforward and teaching seemed much simpler
- how important it is to be listened to in order to learn

As we heard people describe bits and pieces of their unique pattern, a list of more than eighty identifiable factors emerged as significant in describing learner behavior. We suspect that that list is only a beginning. If you will listen to the learners in your church, you will discover your own long list and your own themes.

The main purpose of this book is to encourage you to ask the people in your church how they learn. By discovering that local pattern, then, whatever your role, you will be able to respond to those around you with specific knowledge of learning patterns. We think that is a very good place to begin. Even, as we said above, when you rediscover the obvious, you will find it has life and power because it will be clothed in reality.

In the sections that follow, we will address specific groups of people in order to suggest what may be the significance for them of these themes.

Listening is so basic to all this process that it deserves focused attention in response to the questions:

How can I listen effectively to find out how people learn?

How can I do more good listening in my teaching?

We learned another thing. I have saved it until this point to give it final emphasis. People are learning; they are learning in ways they enjoy, and they are open to learn more when the time is right. That is where the original title of this book, *In Praise of Learning*, came from: We heard learning praised, and now we join in that affirmation of one of the quietly nice things in life. One said it very simply:

*"To me, learning is the most important thing you can get. . . .
For me, learning is the important thing in life."*

TO TEACHERS

Is the church-school teacher an endangered species? If there is any danger of that being true, we want to form a protective organization and save them from extinction. We do not appreciate the enormous influence that good church-school teachers have had on many people.

Once upon a time, and only a generation ago for many, children could go to Sunday school and be sure of one thing - their teacher would be there. In the midst of the whirling, almost circus-like, impression that the whole church had on a child, there was one certain stable point, the teacher. Those who experienced that dependable relationship and that warmth and care look back now after many years of distance and remember those teachers. Comments such as:

"Those Sunday school teachers were always patient. They were always there. You could depend on those people like clockwork. And it was just the fact that they were there that provided the example.

*"I always loved Sunday school and I can remember my church school teachers down home. . . .
My church school teacher was very faithful and conscientious."*

"She was a good teacher, very faithful, and I happened to be in the town I grew up in when my daughter was in the first grade, and she had the same teacher for Sunday school."

*"I remember two church school teachers, neither of whom did it right,
but they were there every Sunday, and you knew they would be there every Sunday
and they sort of expected you to be there every Sunday too."*

Today many churches solve the teacher recruitment problem by rotating teachers in and out of groups and classes. Unless done with extreme care, it appears that that pattern can undercut the dependable relationship that children and youth and adults desire. This is why some Christian education programs provide a "shepherd" as well as a teacher for the class. As the teachers rotate in and out, the "shepherd" stays as the continuing presence.

Why are people reluctant to teach? There are many reasons given, but one underlying current is apprehension. In the first section of this book, we mentioned the theme of nostalgia for simple teaching and learning. The hypothesis raised then was that we are in an awkward period of too much technological knowledge but lack of wisdom. The end result is that Christian education seems very difficult.

Is there some way we can avoid an improperly simplistic stance and still reclaim some of the ordinariness of teaching/learning? Many learners have rather plain expectations. They want to get to know someone so that they can ask some questions and get some answers and talk about how they live their lives.

"The thing that made the class extremely worthwhile was I got a chance to ask questions that I had not heard anybody else ask before, and, always got answers to them."

One child said:

*"I like church school because they don't waste my time.
I really learn about God and the Bible."*

Is that a very unusual child? We do not think so.

We found that many adults have a bashful sense of inadequacy concerning their knowledge of the Bible. They want to know some general basic facts about Bible content. Other adults see the church-school class as a place where they can find a Christian experience in human scale.

*"This was a place that I trusted. These were people and this was a place
where I could feel comfortable and feel loved and affirmed and learn
and then do some things that really made sense.
I was with few enough people long enough that
they gave me have a sense of comfortable belonging. "*

We would wrestle with those plain expectations by asking, What do they really want? What are they really needing? My suggestion is that we take those statements at face value and begin there. Who knows how far we might be able to go with our teachers' agendas if we did a good job with the first steps, their first steps? Speaking from personal experience, an educator said,

*"I want to reemphasize that I'm not against planning education, but I really think we have to use
the agenda that comes to us, and be intentional about that."*

The items mentioned so far lead us back to the question, How can we reclaim some of the ordinariness of teaching and reduce some of the apprehension? Some of the simple expectations learners have of teaching are these:

Teaching involves

- showing up (which means being present as well as being in the room.)
- being dependable.
- being trustworthy in routine things.
- listening to the learner's agendas.
- a willingness to repeat basic truths over again.
- working with learners so they can learn about God and the Bible.

Children said to us that they really did not want another day of school, but they did want to learn. Adults remembered their childhood experiences in the church school, and, beyond the memories of people already mentioned, they remembered a few basic global truths like "God is love" and "Jesus died for me" and "I should love others."

Children also told us quite often about the little play, the Christmas event when they sang, the day they received their Bibles. All these events we interpret as moments of heightened recognition

when just enough challenge was combined with just enough success so that the children could feel they were important members of the church. That is one of their simple expectations.

Youth spoke too and said, "You know." The pattern is like this:

"It makes you realize some things about yourself, you know, hey, you know. Maybe I do need to improve on this or, you know, or say, hey, I'm like that or I didn't know that he was like that. Maybe I'm like that too, you know."

We recognize this to be a current speech habit, a way of punctuating oral conversation, but it strikes us as being a provocative habit. Youth do say and ask, "Do you know?" They want to know if anyone has been where they are and know what it is like. They want a teacher who is some kind of bridge between the childhood they have not fully left and the adulthood they have not fully entered.

Youth spoke often of the importance of being significantly involved in some part of the life of the church as the way they learn. Youth, we think, need to begin teaching, probably in a supervised tutorial model so that they can learn and teach at the same time. Some will learn best through other significant leadership and servant roles.

And adult expectation? Adult motivation patterns require a variety of opportunities for learning. Informal learning through the environment continues to be important for adults. We need to find ways to respond to a sudden interest in a topic, and ways to relax our expectations so we are not over-programming (scheduling ten high-powered sessions when two guided conversations would be sufficient).

Adults need to be listened to, need to be heard. A layperson in a church related:

"We were approached by a person and he said, 'We're having some experiences in our life. . . . Isn't there a group in the church that I can come and sit down and talk over my problem and have somebody listen to me?'"

Many times the only way an adult can find an attentive and trained listener is by reaching a crisis stage in faith or life. Adults are ready, however, to respond before a crisis situation arises and will learn in such a process. While some small-group models are a good step toward this kind of teaching, many suffer from having no trained listener as part of the mix.

We can help teachers overcome their apprehension by affirming that what is most needed in any classroom is a loving, caring, and dependable person, who listens to others. To that can be added the skills and understandings that lead to increased effectiveness, but we should not place so much emphasis on technical aspects of teaching that we smother the human dimensions.

In the section directed to parents (and grandparents), we have elaborated on the role of the wise person. You can turn to that section so that a word-for-word repetition is not necessary here. Many of the learners we talked to paid tribute to someone who was that kind of person for them. Many

times it was a church-school teacher. What some teachers do best, as far as learners are concerned, is share their considered opinions in terse, memorable stories and sayings.

Now, how should we phrase the lead-in to a conclusion? Should we say, "So you want to be a church-school teacher?" (Hoping that what we have suggested so far has encouraged you to say, "I can do that"); or should we say, "So you do not want to be a church-school teacher" (and try one more time to change your mind)? Maybe this will encourage people of both persuasions: learners are ordinary people; teachers should be ordinary too. Looking back, an adult said,

"I'm thinking about three people that have had a lot to do with shaping my Christian living-just ordinary, plain people who had been touched by the Supreme Being."

The best quality you can bring to the class is credibility, and credibility means that the learners can recognize themselves in you. Are you ordinary enough to be a teacher?

We do not want to be misinterpreted as saying that teaching is not a challenging craft worthy of our best efforts in preparation. Teachers should be engaged in a constant refinement of their abilities to construct lesson plans, use creative approaches, and understand the growth and development of the student. But all of this follows and is an addition to the simple and straight forwardness of being oneself. No technique is meant to replace persons and their natural and ordinary relationships.

In our mobile society, one loss we suffer is that of not being close enough to tell people how important they were to us (when we come to this realization down the pike). Some church-school teachers do not know they have been remembered and appreciated by one of those learners in one of those classes some years ago. The teacher gets discouraged.

You, dear teacher, are going to be remembered in a humbling, appreciative way. You will be remembered for being there, for caring, for being yourself, and for teaching. Sometimes the "memory" will be immediate, as in this instance:

"Roger was about two, and he just loved his teacher, Bob. And even after he was out of that class, and for a year afterward, he would just run up and hug Bob because he remembered him. I don't think people realize how much they are going to receive in return for teaching."

Sometimes it will be from the anonymous future, as this adult said quietly,

"I have a lot of memories of Sunday school, all positive, and I know it had a strong influence on my life."

We are sorry you may not know that directly. We hope this indirect and belated message reaches you, really reaches you, down deep inside, and brings a warm glow in your soul.

TO LEARNERS

Words to the learner can begin with a message of appreciation and apology. You are, after all, what this is all about. It is what you, the learner, do that is the final realization of all other aspects of the education process. It has been your willingness to put shape and substance into the descriptions of your learning that has built this book.

In appreciation then, may we say that we have been greatly encouraged by the way in which you have persisted in gaining the knowledge that you have needed. I am impressed with the manner of your learning trek. We are grateful to know that you will approach learning, as you have previously approached it, with individuality of style.

The need for an apology is overdrawn. You seem to carry few grudges and voice few complaints. However, we do believe that those of us who have given direction to the education process have forgotten from time to time that it is your learning that is our objective. We have allowed ourselves to become short-circuited into running programs and managing schools and writing lessons and perfecting techniques. These are not bad except when they become ends instead of means. At our worst, we have measured our success by compiling statistics and losing sight of that individuality mentioned above.

It may be that the following words of encouragement are not needed, but in case you have some reluctance to enjoy your learning, we repeat them as gentle reminders of your essential rights.

As we listened, we heard you describe patterns of learning that are spasmodic and utilitarian.

"Curiosity was always my motive for learning things back in school, but now it's pure survival."

Either of those descriptions might be frowned upon. The frowns are uncalled for. It seems quite legitimate for you to learn on the basis of your need to know, and if that need is born out of moments of your life that stand as disconnected islands, then so be it. If your commitment of energy to learning is grounded on immediate usefulness, then that is where it is grounded.

You have no need to be ashamed about setting your own pace, developing your own agenda, and rating on your own terms the resources and formats for learning. While at times it may be necessary for you to adapt to the way teachers know how to teach, most of the time, teachers and systems should respond to your learning styles.

You have, in addition, the right to ask for solid responses to your questions. The fact that you will make up your own mind should not be used as an excuse always to be "processed" and never be taught. We are convinced that, with just a bit of guidance, you will assert your strength in the learning/teaching dialogue. As you do so, most teachers will find themselves freed to be active in their own strength.

From time to time, you talked to us with a note of apology for not knowing something. We are sure you realize, however, that those feelings of inadequacy are the beginnings of learning and are not grounds for embarrassment. Bluffing, or avoiding a learning context because you do not already know what you need to learn, becomes absurd. Plunge in wherever the pond beckons, near the shore or in the depths. Get in over your head without apology. Follow the main lines or pursue the back roads. It is your journey!

We do not know quite what to make of it, but sometimes you seem to learn by remembering. It is not that you just remember, however; it is that you reshape those memories on the basis of the present and out comes something new. One learner described it this way.

*"It didn't seem like I learned much, but they keep coming back.
I keep getting bits and pieces of it, it catches up and makes a lot of sense now."*

If you have not gone on a nostalgic journey through your own past, we would recommend it. We found people doing just that as they talked to us, and it was a time of learning.

We sense that we have had an implicit definition of learning which emphasizes the new. Don't we also learn what we already know? Don't we learn by calling back to consciousness the people and events and insights of the past to see how they fit the present? Learning is a process of elimination as well as accumulation. The nostalgic journey is a combination of recall and reinterpretation and letting go. One side effect we noticed was that people were surprised to find out how much they already knew.

One of the best ways to learn, if we take the many times it was mentioned as our guide, is to teach. That includes learning in order to have something to teach. It also means learning by the teaching itself. Just putting something you know out for others to share is transforming. The reactions of the learners add to this learning-by-teaching as well. In the words of a teacher:

"The thing that I enjoy most is teaching a class. For me that's one of the best ways to learn also, to actually get into the process and study it so that I can teach it, and then in the teaching of it so many other things come out."

If you find your learning getting stale, teach.

We could not begin to catalogue in a systematic way all the places and resources you have told us about as you described your learning. It is as if the whole world is your curriculum packet. You pick up a piece here, add something to it from over there, fill in the chinks with an idea or a notion from way back then, click your fingers and blink your eyes, and have the insight you are after. The way you use this wide variety of resources is a skill to be treasured.

About the Bible. . . It may be, one of us thought it might be, that you mention wanting to know about the Bible because that is a somewhat obvious, acceptable thing to say. On the other hand, and

only you know the answer to this, you may be identifying a persistent, real concern. We can see why any Christian would want to have a better grasp of our basic book. We can believe that even well schooled people may have a desire for a refresher course in basics. What you have to insist upon, however, is that you get what you want since there seems to be no end to the people who know what you need to learn without bothering to ask.

If there is one aspect of learning that we wish were more evident, it is the step of focusing on what is to be learned before the process takes off in full flight. Call it goal setting or agenda planning or getting down to brass tacks or what you will; we think time spent on this pre-learning step pays off. In travel we seldom set out on a journey with no destination in mind. Even when the goal is "exploration," we have said that to ourselves. In learning, however, we often seem to plunge into a program with little conscious planning of what we want to acquire. This lack of planning and failure to establish a learning goal undercuts motivation and makes evaluation very difficult.

Saying, "I want to learn more about the Bible" is more useful as a goal than saying "I want to learn something." It is even more helpful to think through that desire for Bible study another step in order to be able to say something like "I need a general review of the whole Bible" or "I want to compare the Gospels and the Epistles and see what differences I can recognize" or "I want to understand the concept of the kingdom of God as developed in the Gospel of Matthew."

As you know from the first and last sections of this book, listening is a major theme. You taught us this. You learn by being listened to, by being heard. The minor tragedy in our patterns of interaction is that you have picked up from somewhere that you have no right to be listened to with any expertise unless you are in the midst of great pain and turmoil. So, instead of being served in the education setting by good listeners dealing with the bits and pieces of ordinary learning, you are served by talkers. There should be both, and it is the listening that we ought to do something about. It can happen. After only a brief exercise in communication skills, a pastor reported,

"What can happen in the Christian community of faith is for persons willing to share their own backgrounds, and others, who have different backgrounds, to listen and see if there cannot be growth through their shared experiences. . . . We know that sometimes it is kind of hard, because we guess we fear most the unknown."

Your role in this can be to be more aggressive in securing the time, space, and persons that let you learn by being heard. The training of listeners is going to take some time, but nothing will happen if you do not persist.

We did not conjure up the original title of this book just to catch your attention. The title reflects what we found out in the hours of interviewing that we did. Learners are praising learning. You are learning. You are happy about learning. You have an openness to more learning. Learning is alive and well because you, the learners, are alive and well (and holding forth in every nook and cranny of the church)

TO PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

To Parents

"I began to realize that a lot of things that I learned growing up in my family life influence me now. I can only recognize these looking back as instruments of God's grace. My mother and my father are probably the most significant people that influenced my life."

Parents, you are still a very critical factor in the education of your children. For some of you that is good news, and for others it is bad news. If you want to help your children appreciate and understand the Christian faith, if you hope that they will find that faith important as you have, if you are concerned about the development of their ethical and religious life with a commitment similar to that which many parents devote to the nurture of intellectual and physical ability, then the news from children, from adults who recall their childhood, from teachers and educators, is that you are important. The news is good. Again and again someone would echo this thought:

"Well, my parents had a very great influence on my life. My mother was always very active in church and always believed very much in the mission of the church and being in mission beyond just Sunday morning."

Some parents feel that their children have been taken away from them by the flood of media, agencies and programs that characterize our society. So much is this the case that some parents feel their role has been reduced to doing the laundry, cooking some of the meals, and providing transportation to the next event. In the midst of that competition for the attention of the child, the good news is that parents still have an open door to influence the child's faith.

On the other hand, if you want somebody else to take over the task of religious nurture, if you really would like to have this area of their development as your neutral territory, if you are so confused by the flux in religious ideas and fads that you want to throw up your hands and say, "Go ask somebody else," the news is not encouraging. The news is bad. You are still important.

On the basis of our interviews this seems to be the way it works, this relationship between parent and child in religious matters:

1) Children sense, long before they have the ability to understand the patterns objectively, whether or not the church is important to the parent(s). They start off with a value bias that is intuitive. A parent said,

"I've learned that my children pick up a lot more than I wish they did from the way I live, and a lot less from the way I want to live. They are very impressionable."

2) Children read behavior, that is, they know whether or not the parent participates with consistency in the life of the church. They know whether or not they are sent to church or accompanied. On the basis of this reading of behavior they conclude how important those matters

related to church are to the parents(s). Memories of her childhood have influenced this woman who said,

*"I wished then that my parents went like other parents did.
Maybe that is why we hardly ever miss church with our children.
Maybe it's because I feel I missed out as a child."*

3) Children listen. They do not listen for a systematic theology. They do not listen for a complete recital of biblical history. They listen for the occurrence of God language in reference to the problems of their lives. Does God relate to their fears? Is God seen as concerned about their problems? Is God dependable? Listen to this child.

*"If you're scared you don't need to be scared 'cause God is always with us.'
[Who told you that?] My dad. My dad tells me lots of things about God."*

4) Children remember. They remember global statements. They remember them because they believe them. They believe them because parent(s) believe them. When they press for answers in those long chains of "why" and "how," they seem to be pressing for assurance rather than explanation. "Do you really believe that?" is the functional significance of the "why" and the "how." And as the parent explains, the message is the reassurance, "Yes. I believe this, and you can too."

5) Children are looking for a consistency of presence. They want someone who will give them honest answers to their questions, even honest admissions of "I don't know," but they want to be able to ask the question. Someone must be there, in their lives, in an open and dependable fashion. They need explanations of the decisions of life. A parent talked about a changing pattern in his family and gave this advice:

"We should talk about moral values. We assume that they're taught without talking, and I don't believe that's really true. If I get too much change from the store, what should I do? Should I give it back or not? And if I should, why should I? With the first child we talked about it, and then when the other three came along we still gave the change back, but we never said anything about it. In our day and age I'm not sure children always understand the things you do."

6) If matters of faith are important to the parents, then children move rather freely and easily through the whole of life and the whole of the church putting together adequate insights for living. They construct their own systems of interpretations, sufficient for the time being, and proceed with the business of living at hand.

The role of the parents in the teaching of their children is indicated in this too simple but essentially common reflection of the views of our learners. Some children learn in spite of their parents. They happen into relationships with other adults; the words we have for teachers in another section, and to grandparents later on in this section, are based on that possibility. The surer bet, however, is that

children will reflect the basic faith stance of their parents and move into the acquisition of more precise knowledge of the faith, with a bias for or against that stems from parental roots.

Parents are not excused from having that influence just because they have some gaps in their knowledge in matters of faith. It is not the content that children use as the criteria of importance. It is the attitude they adopt, and they pick up the attitude from ordinary and repeated parent behavior. One inactive member sent her daughter to church in her place. My guess is that the child understands that she is going in her mother's place and knows that she is expected to take the church more seriously than her mother does. My guess is that she probably will not.

The patterns of religious life in the home among those we talked to were quite varied. Some had specific religious moments of Bible reading and/or prayer. Others had a much more casual pattern of saying grace at meals and infrequent discussions of religious matters. A teen-ager describes one such pattern in response to the question, Who influences your faith?

“My dad, because we've just done so many things together. We have our talks together. In your early teens you think you know it all and you don't go by your parent's reasoning too much. But then you get older and tend to realize that maybe, Hey, my parents have something there. Maybe they know what they're talking about.”

It did not appear that the pattern of specifically religious moments was as critical as the sensed importance of matters of faith in the whole parental life-style.

Participation in the life of the institutional church was a major factor in our interviews. One recollection was stated this way:

“Well, it started from the home. . . . My mother was religious and my father, they were both members of the church and the church school. See, if you have parents that are in the church there's nothing left for you to do but also be in the church.”

In an age when the institutional form of the Christian faith has been discounted by many, that pattern seems to be a significant warning. Children told us that the church was important to them. Church school and worship and choir and drama and fellowship hour and potluck supper all floated in and out of their conversations as clues to the meaning of Christianity. Parents remain the key to that institutional reality for children. Thus, parents must see squarely the great difficulty they face when they imagine they can avoid the church and still affirm Christianity among children who need concrete expressions of faith.

It is not uncommon to find adults who are a bit uncertain of their ability to represent adequately Christianity for children. It is the same anxiety that makes it difficult to recruit teachers. Parents are not immune to this lack of confidence in religious matters. The compensating force is that, for children, the process of learning about matters of faith is as natural as the process of learning how

to talk and how to read and how to live. Parents are not expected to be highly sophisticated religious technicians with computer-like recall of theological and biblical data shaped by an accurate familiarity with plans of intellectual and moral and faith development.

No, the expectation of parents is that they will communicate to their children by behavior and word the core realities of their faith, day in and day out, in the normal process of living. Children do not expect perfection nearly as much as they expect dependability. Then parents, and others; become the influence described by one this way:

"It was Sunday school teachers, my dad and my mother, people I was around. People that I looked up to and really truly knew they were good people. They're the ones that really touched me."

Parents have a responsibility in faith matters that is very much like the responsibility they accept in music education. If you will, pretend that helping your child learn Christianity is like helping that child learn to play the piano. In both, when you sense a level of readiness, you encourage the child, find a good teacher, expect the child to go to the lesson times regularly, and practice in between. The parent may or may not be a pianist. The parent may or may not, even if a pianist, be able to conduct the formal teaching of his or her own child. But neither of those conditions prevents many parents from introducing their children to music, to musical talent, to training in playing the piano. Christianity deserves that kind of parental concern and similar parental action.

The word we heard on parents is not only one of importance, but also one of possibility. Parents of all sorts have had a strong positive influence on the faith of their children. We did hear that some people did not become conscious of that influence until years later. The parent may not have the blessing of immediate clear appreciation. It may be a good idea for discouraged parents to sit down and listen to some adults as they reflect back over the years so they can see how important the small things they are doing now may be when the picture is painted by their children years hence.

To Grandparents

One of the most fascinating themes in the descriptions of learning that we heard was the role of the grandparent. It was not always the bloodline grandparent - it could be a grandparent figure. Time and again people recalled the influence of such a person on their faith in the childhood years. We heard many comments like these:

"What I learned, I learned from my grandmother and from attending church and the Sunday school people."

*"My grandmother and my grandfather.
My grandfather was, I would say, more religious even than my grandmother."*

We puzzled over this theme. Why were grandparents and their counterparts mentioned so often? Is that pattern going on today, or were we seeing a pattern of extended family life that has been destroyed in our splintered life-styles? What is it that the grandparent does that the parent and

teacher seemingly cannot do? We do not have the answers to those queries, but we do have some suggestions.

The grandparent has a relationship with a child that is one of closeness and yet distance. That means that grandparents function as wise people for children. Grandparents have the freedom to be frank and simple in matters of faith that others find difficult because of too many other important relational agendas. A child can get to know the grandparent over a number of years in a variety of settings, in contrast to the much more restricted pattern of the teacher/child and the much more complicated relationship of parent/child.

When this pattern of relationships is combined with the freedom some grandparents have to reduce life to its simplest elements, the stage is set for a unique pattern of influence. At least that is our speculation. You can test this out in your own reflections on life and in conversations with other learners.

The "so what" for today is that while children still could find a "grandparent" relationship of great importance in learning the faith, where are the grandparents? How can we facilitate this relationship for children? Grandparents, where are you? Are you hiding? Have you been away from children so long that they frighten you? Have you become convinced that only the young understand life and that you have no wisdom to share? Wherever you are, and whatever you feel, know this: **children need you!**

Children need your presence in their lives over some years. Children need you to tell them the story of your life. Children need to hear your bits of wisdom. Children need to hear you recite the biblical stories. Children need your sense of history, your perspective, your love. A church-school teacher said,

*"There is a lack of elderly people participating in our Sunday school,
and I don't think they realize how much they can give to the children.
I know they had a big influence on my life."*

The parent's responsibility in this is to find each child a grandparent. Parents, more than anyone else, can help create the long-term relationship with the person of wisdom who can be a great influence on the faith development of the child. Of course, the dynamic is not fully described in these few paragraphs, but you get the idea. Intergenerational learning events in a church can foster the child/grandparent relationship. So can the way you begin to be involved in your neighborhood. We think, however, that new steps toward the encouragement of this phase of learning will have to involve your home and family life to be effective.

Good news, bad news, parents and grandparents are very important in the religious and faith growth of children. Challenge and comfort? Few adults feel so competent that they have no sense of inadequacy in this task. Yet, time and again we heard how effective ordinary parents and grandparents have been in communicating that basic sense of importance and encapsulated wisdom to their children. If they can, you can.

TO PASTORS, EDUCATORS, AND OTHER LEADERS

Watch an accomplished gymnast - all the movements appear effortless. Watch a novice - the same movements are strenuous. The difference is that the accomplished gymnast has learned to perform only those body actions which produce the desired result, while much that the novice is doing is counterproductive.

The analogy serves to point the direction for the kind of leadership that is needed to enhance learning: When leadership is appropriate to the essential needs of learners it may have all the appearance of being effortless. Do not be deceived, however, and conclude that no leadership is the best leadership. On the other hand, a wild flurry of programming, a constant search for innovation, can consume so much energy from everyone that learning is rendered difficult and complicated, nigh unto impossible.

The task of leaders is to know the situation well enough to know what essential guidance is needed so that the very natural process of learning can take place. One critical step in the pursuit of that awareness is the simple, yet often neglected, on-site research into learning. How often have we raced ahead without asking learners in our context how they learn!

In the process of our conversations with learners we found a considerable variety of patterns. Learning is a complex set of social interactions shaped by the unique histories, interests, and needs of individuals. Yet we found some patterns. Those, patterns constitute a promise rather than a prescription. If you will listen carefully to those in your setting, you will find a similar combination of the unique and the common. Furthermore, you will find that concepts you are familiar with as theory, come alive in provocative concreteness.

In church after church, leaders in education have conducted interest surveys. Those just will not be adequate. To be sure, such a procedure is better than blind programming, but not much. People are not used to being asked how they learn. When asked to comment on the interview experience, one person said:

"It's been a good opportunity to say some things. . . .It's one thing to hide behind a cloak of idealism. It's another thing to look at the cold, hard reality of things and hopefully learn from both. We should keep our high ideals, but we have to work with what is real, and then try to blend and mix, influence, and mold something better than what we've got."

The process takes more attentive listening than a form provides. With attentive listening, learners can discover and verbalize their styles. In the process they will also begin to discover interests and needs that are of a different quality than rating items on an interest menu.

Leaders, take the time to listen, and we think you will be helped to see what you can do to enhance learning. You must, however, be willing to hear what the learners are saying (in contrast to hearing what you want them to say). Hearing requires being willing to start where learners want to start. It requires holding back from imposing our "better" learning agendas. The temptation to assume that

one knows what others need to know better than they do seems to be an unfortunate side effect of training for leadership in education. Another of the side effects is the assumption that education is the cure-all for all ills.

As educators, we can find ourselves being asked to assume the "savior" role for any aspect of church life that is not what it is supposed to be. If the people of the church do not give enough, if they do not work hard enough, if they do not worship frequently enough, if they are not good enough parents, if they do not support the evangelism program or the social action program vigorously enough, it is always because they do not know enough. Create an education program and the other problem will be solved.

That messianic understanding of education is a convenient misplacement of responsibility. Learning can affect people in all the areas mentioned, but that does not justify placing on education the cure-all responsibility. The overload of expectation on education diverts attention from other reasons for the existence of those problems and prevents education from carrying out its legitimate serving role in the lives of people and institutions. Ironically, letting learning proceed on a less grandiose path frees it to be more effective in the course of growth.

Another unfortunate side effect of training in leadership is that through an increased awareness of the technical dimensions of teaching/learning, we become servants of the technology instead of servants of learners. Technique is not only a matter of developing a repertoire of skills and a file cabinet full of resources. It is also a matter of becoming committed to an unnatural language system of jargon. The result of this increased technical sophistication is, unfortunately, the sidetracking of education leaders into technician roles that fall short when measured by the ruler of common sense.

We are not advocating a naive and simplistic approach to education. We are advocating going beyond the technician level to the simplicity imaged in the analogy of the accomplished gymnast. Learners, for example, if we will ask them and listen to what they say, will tell us how they learn, what motivates their learning, what kinds of resources they use, and what patterns of relationships are genuinely helpful. If we will hear them, start wherever they want to start, and serve them well at that level, the door to all that we might hunger for stands open.

Listening is a task for leaders as a process of teaching, besides being a step in preparation for teaching. I think the burden for providing trained listeners and occasions for listening falls most fully on education leaders. It is our task to acquire these skills and sensitiveness ourselves. Then it is our task to train others. The importance of this theme in our research has led us to pay fuller attention to the rationale and process of listening in the final section of this book. The possibility was attained in one church as the pastor reported:

“They’ve been shaking hands with people and sharing a few things like you do during the Ritual of Friendship in the pew, but in this instance they were sitting down and asking something and listening to the response and all of a sudden these people are talking to each other and listening to each other.”

All too often education leaders find themselves in an administrative position to the exclusion of teaching. We think that must change. The leaders and their supportive institutions must both change their perceptions to include teaching as a central role. The non-teaching pastor, educator, or volunteer leader should be the exception rather than the rule. Preaching is not a sufficient substitute for teaching in most instances.

Making education decisions (or guiding boards and committees as they make those decisions) when one has no regular relationship with learners in a teaching/learning situation cuts one off from the ground springs of the entire enterprise. Learners are what it is all about. We are aware that schooling serves the church in many non-learning ways. Groups and classes provide a human-scale arena within the institution and promote a sense of belonging. Classes often minister to their members in providing care and support in the midst of the joys and pains of life. Given all those values for schooling, the point remains that the primary objective of education is learning, and administrators ought to keep themselves in the teaching/learning relationship.

Leaders have the opportunity, and thus the responsibility, to assume the advocacy role for learners in the life of the whole church. Let us repeat some clichés: The whole church teaches; people of all ages learn from all that the church does. Our learners supported those well-known statements again and again. Most of the time they were not experiencing internal conflict as they experienced the whole church and learned from all that the church does. Still it would not hurt for leaders in education to "walk through" the life of the church with a particular learner in mind and ask of everything they see, "What does this teach?"

Children are particularly vulnerable in this way. As the fourth-graders we talked to described their experience of the church, we received a picture of a whirling mass of perceptions more like a three-ring circus than anything else. In answering, "What do you learn in church?" a child went through this almost painful description:

*"Well, you learn the Bible and sometimes you learn new stuff, well.
If you don't know it and like that and then there's other stuff
like if you want to know, let's see, like how to be more religious and stuff like that
and then, that's about it."*

That is not surprising, given the nature of the child. However, the child is caught in that maelstrom with very little power to do anything about it, other than experience it, come what may. And what do they experience? Something as inconspicuous as this, in reply to "What's your favorite place in the church?"

"My favorite place is the drinking fountain when I get thirsty."

We know that there are those of some theological persuasions who firmly believe that children have no rights. We know that our society shows signs of being less and less inclined to give children a fair shake in general education. We know that some are so intent on securing an adult conversion from children that they treat children as little adults and turn everything that might be

education into indoctrination for decision. We deplore all of that and appeal for education leaders to see as part of their task the monitoring of the whole life of the church as advocates for children.

Leaders in education must also take seriously the relationship between consistency, ritual, participation, and learning. We noted that children have a strong appreciation for that teacher who "is always there." Others spoke of the importance to them of learning through participation in the ritual acts of worship. In part, people learn through the symbolic truths which are always somewhat beyond definition, but in a less profound sense, people also learn from dependable repetitions of presence and action. The education strategy which emphasizes the new, to the exclusion of the dependably familiar, undercuts this aspect of learning.

In the area of sales there is a tendency for those doing the selling to become bored with their dependable presentation. For their own interest they begin to alter that presentation for the sake of novelty. I suspect that those in the pastoral ministry may suffer from a similar "presentation fatigue" and seek forms of expression that are new for the sake of newness. But people use global statements of truth as handles for entire systems of meaning and sets of entire relationships. If we realize this, then we can provide the repetitions of these affirmations to the extent that they are needed by the learners. The best-known verse in the Bible rings true to this fourth-grade girl:

"The best part of it is when he says, 'Whosoever believeth in me shall not perish, but have everlasting life,' because that means a lot to me because if you don't love God then you'll perish, but if you love him a lot then you'll always have life with God. [What does "perish" mean?] I'm not sure, but I get the meaning when I hear it."

In the first section we suggested that those who pick up this book can find the section which addresses their situation or role most closely and read that first. They may not want to read any other section. The exception to that advice is for those in leadership roles. You are urged to begin to familiarize yourself with the perspective of others by reading the sections addressed to them. You are strongly urged to read the section on listening, for the reasons mentioned above. Both serve as steps toward the final urging, that you explore your own context in a careful and attentive manner.

What will result from that on-site research is learning. You will learn where the children, youth, and adults are in your context. Thus you will have that specific and concrete base on which to provide leadership in the decision-making process related to education.

You have fully as much right to learn in your own style as does anyone else. Identify your own learning patterns as you explore the patterns of others. See clearly your strongest pattern and plan your own growth and development accordingly. In doing so you will provide a model for learning that will encourage others to stand in their strength and become co-learners in the journey of faith.

“IN PRAISE OF LEARNING” TO CHILDREN

We have divided this section into two parts. In the first part, we have some words of hope. In the second part, we have some words of warning (not about you, but for you).

Words of Hope

Jesus made a point of showing his concern for children. Please, please remember that! In fact, he told his disciples that children are so special to God that no one should keep them from knowing him or God. I believe he meant that, because he knew how much God loves you. Can you believe that God loves you, even when your life is painful or sad? If you can believe that, and if you can find those adults who love you too, then you are well on your way to learning what Christianity is all about.

Christianity may seem to you to be very complicated. "The Bible is a complicated book." "People use long and mysterious words." You hear contradictions. Well, it is complicated and mysterious and contradictory. But it is no more so than much of the rest of your life.

If you waited until you understood all the mysteries of digestion before you ate, you would starve. Christianity is like that. If you will learn the basic simple truths of God's love, and believe them, you can be strong. Then you can explore Christianity's mysteries and enjoy them too.

Learning is an enjoyable part of being a Christian. So are worship, being with other people at church dinners, singing in choirs, and finding all the hiding places in the church building. Put all of that together and enjoy it. It belongs to you because you belong to God.

There are adults who enjoy children and like to share their lives with children. If you look around carefully, you can find them. Your challenge will be to give them a chance to show you in their own way that they really care for you.

You may be surprised to find good adults in places you did not expect. Do you know that some old people would like very much to be nice to you? Some of them are far away from their families and do not see children very often. They need some time to get comfortable with you. If you will give them that time, they can tell you wonderful stories about their lives. They know a lot about life and can tell you answers to difficult problems and mysteries.

Just because some adult is introduced as a teacher does not mean this person will not also be your friend. You see, he or she has been given a job to do, teaching, and wants to do that job well. If you will cooperate with adults who are teachers, they can relax and be more themselves. You can help them by showing that you are interested in them. It will also help them if you tell them you like them and enjoy knowing them.

Most churches have adults who really want to be good people. They are not perfect, but I know you do not care if they are not. They do not know all the answers to everything, and that may embarrass them at first. But they will get over that. The same adults who do not have all the answers probably have more wisdom about life than they know. Together you can find that wisdom and enjoy it.

There are adults who firmly believe that God has given every person the right to health and education and to protection. They believe that children have these rights just as much as adults do. Some adults believe that children have the right to be loved, that they have the right to be heard, the right to ask questions, the right to have feelings, the right to be children. These adults are on your side. Find them.

It may seem to you that everywhere you turn you are dependent on some adult. That is not completely true. You spend much of your time with other children. If you are not competing with them for attention from adults, they can become helpful friends in enjoying life, in growing up at your own pace, in learning.

Words of Warning

We are sorry to report that the world you live in is not always glad to see you. Some adults are afraid of you. They are afraid that you are going to get in their way. They are afraid that you are going to take up too much of their time. They are afraid that it is going to cost too much to raise you.

The adults who are afraid of you are going to avoid you if they can. You will find places that are marked off "For Adults Only," and you will not be wanted in those places. You will find some adults who will send you away in order to avoid spending time with you. You will find some adults who will never really listen to you because they do not want to hear what you say.

You should not feel that you are responsible for the fears adults have of you and of other children. Even when those adults try to make you feel bad because they are afraid, you should try to remember (somewhere deep inside your own thoughts) that you are not the problem. If adults are afraid, they must accept their fear as being their problem, not yours.

Some adults do not have much to teach you about the Christian faith. They do not believe much of anything and so have little to share. If you find adults like that, you will only embarrass them if you push them too hard. It will be better if you will just find some other adult who does have a faith to share, and listen to him or her.

Some adults will use you to satisfy themselves. They will pretend that you are already grown up and can make decisions like an adult. They want you to repeat religious phrases that you do not understand. They want you to act in classrooms like little adults. You should remember that you have a God-given right to be a child. You do not have to be an adult before you are ready, just to make it easy for them.

You cannot depend on some adults. They will not be there when you need them. They will tell you one thing in words and tell you something very different in their actions. The hardest ones to deal with will be those who act very dependable but let you down just when you have begun to trust them. Sometimes those adults will not even bother to give you any explanation, they just disappear. I know that is not very kind, but some adults are not very kind.

We suspect you already know that some adults are unfair. They play favorites. They trap you. They lie to you. And, what is worse, they seem to think you do not know what they are doing because you are just a child. They seem to think that being an adult gives them the right to do as they please, no matter how you feel.

Some adults will use you as though you were a pet dog or cat. As long as you are amusing and cute, they will like you. But when you are in a bad mood or angry or tired of performing, they will have little to do with you.

We think you have the right to be warned about some adults. They have all the power, and you cannot change them. But maybe, if you know that some of the things you suspect are true, you can learn to live with those adults and still survive.

When you find yourself with adults like those we have described, and you become discouraged, maybe you can remember that many children have lived with such adults and have come out O.K. And, with your eyes open, you can find some other adults, as well as some other children, and find hope in them.

A most important thing to remember always is that God loves you always and forever and there are adults out there who are trustworthy in your home or your church or your school.

ESFI:
Categories for sharpening our awareness of the totality of what and how we teach.

Much of the nurturing and formation of Christians takes place in ways that are often invisible to those concerned about Christian education. A simple set of categories can help us become aware of these relatively hidden yet powerful dimensions of our tasks of analysis and response.

Looking at the life of a community of faith through the lens of the ESFI categories provides a way to explore education in this context beyond, as well as within, the walls of a classroom experience.

The categories are represented by the acronym ESFI in which E stands for enculturation, S stands for socialization, F stands for formation and I stands for Instruction. These are not separate processes but they can be distinguished for the purposes of bringing dimensions of our task to consciousness.

E – Enculturation is the process by which persons develop a way of seeing and living into the symbolic realities of a culture. Much of this seems to happen by osmosis – we are surrounded by these perceptions, inhabit them without much reflection, and are hard put to say what they are until we find ourselves in another culture and note that they see the world differently. They have different subtle values and lifestyle expectations. It is what one would describe in saying, "This is just the way we are."

"These are the things we celebrate. These are the things we assume. These are 'our' foods and our conversation patterns. Of course, these things are important, aren't they for everyone?"

Enculturation takes place through living inside a culture so that we are almost subconsciously as we are influenced by cultural rituals, architecture, music, food, dress, and patterns of relating. Formal and informal liturgy does this in the church – from how we celebrate Easter and Christmas to how we organize for a church supper or a church social. Messages are sent by who gets what parts of our shared space. And on and on.

To become conscious of this takes some doing but it is possible to look at almost anything the faith community does and ask " what is the message communicated by this?"

Within a faith community it includes, but is not limited to the following –

- physical characteristics: of the building and grounds; the races, ages, dress, abilities/disabilities of its members; the aesthetic nature of the building and where resources have been committed within that building; the kinds of vehicles in the parking lot, including which particular cars are permitted to be parked in front of the church.
- whether children and youth are spoken to or with; who interacts with whom; whether they are related to with the same kind of care shown adults; how "the other" (whether a visitor, a racial/ethnic minority, a person of a different economic class, a disabled person, a stranger, etc) is both welcomed and integrated into the community.

- affective aspects of the people: Is there joy, acceptance, openness, warmth expressed? To all within the walls of the church or only to some? Are young people accepted based on who they are or are they expected to be miniature adults? If they are accepted, are they separated from the adult community and given over to the “youth minister”, “children’s director”? Do adults get down to eye level with children? Is celebration a part of the community? Do the sacraments reflect all the richness of the many biblical images presented? Is there fellowship, where people talk with each other, or do they pass one another without really relating, coming into the sanctuary and leaving, having done their one-hour duty? Do people gossip, gripe, complain, and what about?
- broader relational aspects of the people: Do members of the faith community live their faith outside the doors of the church? Are the church doors truly open for new people? Do members seek out the stranger? Do members recognize and welcome one another when not within the faith community? What do children see when they see members of their church in their day-to-day interactions outside the church?

At issue is the reflective inquiry "Is this what we want to communicate?" If not, then changes can be made (but they will probably have to be made slowly since matters of culture are loaded with emotional attachments.)

*Walt was estranged from the church because of an unfortunate incident years ago. He knew he didn't have much use for that stuff. When he decided to attend the funeral of a friend with the service in a church sanctuary he went with reluctance. He felt nothing until the 23rd Psalm was read and he felt something inside that surprised him – a sense of "that is a good Psalm." He had memorized that Psalm for a Sunday School class program. He joined in when all were invited to recite the Lord's Prayer and felt that same surprising depth of "rightness." (He was annoyed when they said Trespasses and Trespasped against us since he knew that portion as debts and debtors.)
The icons of enculturation still moved his heart.*

S – Socialization is the process by which persons become effective members of a community (family, school, church, neighborhood, and nation) as they learn what the role expectations are of members of the community and how to fulfill them. As these new people learn how to function within the faith community, they discover how to interact and relate to various people and groups.

Put as questions, some of these may seem rather trivial, "how do we expect people to dress for worship?"; others are more profound, "How do we expect Christians to give of their resources of time and talent and money for church tasks?"; and still others speak to some very deep issues, "How do Christians participate in the public arenas of business and politics?"

Some of these learnings are included below:

- How others are to be addressed – Mr./Mrs.? Who is called by their first name? Are titles used? By whom, in reference to whom?
- What is the proper behavior for church? For Holy Communion? For prayer? For other activities?
- Who is responsible for what in the life of the church? Why?
- Are there certain “church things” set aside for only certain people? Why?
- How and who do we visit? And who does the visiting?

- How to do roles; lead a meeting, lead worship, plan, organize, witness, how to do accountability with funds and resources, group process skills, listen to others, mentor, teach, and on and on.

Leonie walked to the communion table for her first time to serve as a Deacon and distribute the elements. There had been no training provided to her for learning the little ins and outs of that process, yet she did it just like others had done. Even though she was not an "old timer" in that place she had learned the role and performed it well. She fit in.

F- Formation is the term used in this set of categories for the internalization of matters of faith. Making the faith of others one's own happens in formation. There is a very individualized aspect to this, for within a faith community, each person's formation varies to a certain degree. The variances though tend to be within a set of parameters set by the process of enculturation in the faith community and at home (and for adults especially, their prior experiences through the years have already done a lot of enculturation). Depending upon the amount of interaction the person has with the broader community outside the church, that community has a serious impact on the enculturation process and therefore affects the work of formation, within the faith community.

"I" statements indicative of formation, include:

- I believe...
- I am...
- I am a disciple of Christ and this is what that means....

In each case it will mean something somewhat different. Some aspects of discipleship will be held to more closely than others; some will be lived out better than others.

- I am a member of this family of faith and that means...

Again, this means different things, depending upon the age of the person coming into the community; the support and teaching he/she receives from home, if a young person; etc.

- I reach out to the world in these ways...
- I can do these things in the church...
- I give these priority...

Jerry told later about the challenge that had been put before him when he was asked to write a personal statement of faith as part of the New Members class. The challenge, he said, was to write down what was really his faith and not that of the teacher or the pastor.

"I had to think hard. When I was done with that writing I knew more deeply than I had ever known before that I was a Christian."

The last category is **I – Instruction**. One simple way to characterize this part of the process is to think of the Christian faith and the Christian community as having a set of languages. Learning these languages makes it possible to participate fully in the "conversation."

To be an "at ease" member of a congregation's life we need to know their language of worship. Some parts of that language are spoken or sung portions of a service. One powerful language system is the music. Another is the language of praying.

At the base of these languages are the languages of Bible content: the people, the stories, the instructions and admonitions, the interpretations of key concepts. Closely allied to this set of languages are the languages of doctrine and of history (pointing to denominational continuities and identities) and the languages of mission and service (unspoken actions as well as spoken visions of faithful response.) We know, but sometimes forget, the language of our corporate behavior is more powerful than we want to admit in support of or in contradiction of our verbalizations.

Mary said, "I went with a friend to her church. A Christian church to be sure but I felt so out of place because I just didn't know the songs. I didn't know the way they prayed. I didn't know when to stand up and sit down. It was like being in a foreign country. I needed a translator!"

To this more easily programmed learning of the key languages we add the learning that comes from how life is lived out in the church and world where the real learning takes place. For the stories of salvation, judgment, liberation, redemption, justice, reconciliation have meaning when they are lived by the people who claim them. They also have meaning when they are NOT lived by those who claim these stories as their own and this meaning is deadening to the faith, not life giving.

ESFI – categories that help us see the whole picture while remembering that this all happens together. While we already have this awareness, we think that this format helps us to make specific what it is we live out as educators in "our curriculum" and helps us to raise issues that have a teaching impact that may not be fully realized in the church's life at large.

ON LISTENING

We listened with the desire to find out how people learn. They expressed appreciation for our listening and described it as a learning experience. The intensity with which they said this prompts us to say three things:

1. The process of listening to learners is an extremely valuable way to establish relevance in education programming.
2. Attentive listening is a valuable teaching process.
3. Training listeners should be one of the first leadership development objectives for the church.

Listening has a firmly established place in counseling. Being able to hear what the counselee says is a prerequisite of all that follows. Many times the listening process is most of what is needed, and the counselee leaves the process with the pain and the problem under control.

Listening has a firmly established value in prayer and meditation. The quieting of one's being so that the still small voice may speak is known to be essential to cultivating an awareness of the Almighty. We pray, and in our speaking and listening, claim a God who also both listens and speaks. To be able to listen is to take on the quality of godliness.

Many people, when they stop to think about it, have no difficulty describing moments when the attentive listening of another has been a significant learning moment. And yet, with all these recommendations, we continue to identify teaching with talking or with a busyness of activities that makes steady and productive conversation almost impossible. Why this aversion?

Someone said it is a characteristic of the citizens of our country that our conversations are much more like golf than tennis. Each of us puts into play our own idea or feeling and then, with only a polite bow to others, we proceed to hit that ball from the first tee to the last green, on and on and on. In contrast, in tennis, two or more people work with one idea or feeling, and by necessity as well as choice, must receive as well as return.

Perhaps our aversion is that we are "pre-minded"- that is, we already know what is going to be said, so we do not need to listen. We have heard it all before. People seldom come up with anything new. If they do not say what we want, we pretend that they do. We listen, but only for the momentary pause that allows us to break in on the pattern and speak. Perhaps we avoid listening because we have no real interest in anyone but ourselves.

It may be that listening is difficult because it involves us in change. If we really hear what is being said, we may have to respond in a manner that disrupts our lives. Thus it is better to listen very selectively, in order never even to hear that which might disturb our opinions, our plans, our privacy.

Listening may be avoided because it can be hard work. To listen, really listen, one must be able to concentrate, to accept the speaker, to be unfailingly honest and transparently real, and be willing to enter an experience from which the listener may not return unchanged. It can, in fact, as Douglas V. Steere said in his classic book, *Listening to Another**, be a personal ordeal.

Listening is not 'just listening,' nor is it indifference, nor is it what you do when you cannot think of what to say, nor is it all that there is to teaching. What it is, is a process of learning that can bring genuine insights to educators and is highly valued among learners.

It may be that we do not listen because we do not know how. Listening is a skill. It seems hardly ever to be one that is taught with any focused attention. We have (or used to have) courses in public speaking, but very seldom do we hear of anyone offering even a session on attentive listening. What might such an experience look like?

We think that persons who want to learn to listen must face some of the barriers and challenges to listening that we have already mentioned. Some of these seem rather trivial. We think they are not. Particularly, they are not inconsequential when they have become embedded in our lives as habits.

On the other side, we think we must begin to see the values of listening carefully. By listening we can develop insight into actual people. Too often we are at some distance from people as we relate in a pattern of mutual stereotypes. "I find a label for you, and you find a category for me; I relate to the label, and you relate to the category." Listening is the means for breaking through these barriers to the realities of people.

Listening gives concreteness to the theoretical. Much of what learners told us about themselves, the themes of this book, is part of the theory of education. Beyond theory, however, are the concrete embodiments of those same truths. Those people bring the generalities to life with sound and color and clever twists and detail and story. Listening is the means to give life to what is already known.

Listening allows us to perceive the uniqueness that is the other person. Yes, the other person is real, and he or she brings life to theory, and comes alive as no other person on the face of the earth. Two people saying the same thing, word for word, do not say the same things. Finding those subtle differences by careful listening is exciting.

The picture that some paint for research is like the drilling of shallow test holes all over a landscape. Another form of research takes what time and other resources are available and goes much deeper, with fewer exploratory wells. Listening leads to depth understandings as the attentive ear allows the speaker to find the unknown in himself.

To these values of listening and to the challenges to listening we must then add a training process. Essentially, such training would involve practice sessions in which a time of listening is followed by the listener's reporting what has been said. Then, in one way or another (by reviewing the audio or digital tape or having a reply from the speaker or getting the opinion of an impartial evaluator), the listener is helped to see how well the listening has gone. Then the cycle is repeated.

The practice sessions should be focused, and they are better when short in length to begin with. The listener should be encouraged to listen to whole person. That means to listen not only to the content of what is being said, but to all the other message carriers, such as tone of voice, body expression, and the significant silence. Listeners should be helped to slow down and stay in the here and now and not rush ahead into interpretation.

In our research process we did these things:

- 1) We asked for a full hour with each person. That seemed to be a good average length of time. People will work with considerable effort for an hour. Beyond that, energy limits are reached. When listening to children though, the younger they are, the less time they will spend in this process.
- 2) We stated our desire to hear them tell us how they learn. The topic was usually mystifying, at first. We would often suggest that they describe their formal learning experiences, as an easy place to begin.
- 3) When they mentioned what seemed to be an important event or experience, we would ask them to describe at least part of that in as great detail as they could. We emphasized description, rather than evaluation. When opinions were offered, we accepted them, but tried to come back around to their learning picture as soon as we could.
- 4) We would provide a stimulus question when we had to (like inquiring about people and places and resources), but we tried to avoid a verbalized checklist.
- 5) We tried to be responsive to their portraits of learning, asking for greater detail and clarity by following their lead. Since we wanted to review the conversations at length, we taped all of them and had them transcribed. The on-site explorations you may conduct would not require that process, although listening to a taped playback adds greatly to the listener's insight.

The incorporation of listening into the teaching process in the classroom or formal setting has been most fully realized by the small group discussions that continue to be valuable to adult learners. The small group discussion at least provides the opportunity for more people to take part in the conversation. It is not guaranteed, however, that the increased participation will provoke attentive listening. The introduction of a trained listener into that process could enrich it.

To make listening possible the pace of teaching/learning must be controlled through a reduced student/teacher ratio and an uncrowded agenda. "More" in teaching is not always best, and in this instance "less" is more efficient. The time spent in listening serves the learners by allowing for their movement from the acceptable answer to the answer that is truly their own. When they have this alive-space that the careful listeners provide, they are encouraged to find their way through the unexplored dimensions of their own minds and discover the more basic issues, the more central affirmations, the deeper motivations.

We listened. You can too. We hope you will.

We hope you will take these few guides and embark on your own research to guide the decision-making process of church education.

We hope you will incorporate listening into the best of your other teaching skills.

We hope you will urge upon the church the training of listeners for the enrichment of education.

The learners are ready. They ask to be heard.

It may well be that the future of education lies not in our management of the new technology of education, nor in massive modifications of structures or curriculum, but in the understanding of the reason for all of this, the learner.

* see the appendix for a listing of some other titles of good books on listening.

APPENDIX

"Each connection we make with another human being is a starting point, an opportunity to love and learn, to grow in wisdom, and with practice, expand the sphere of our love from that one relationship to many relationships to the One all-inclusive, all-encompassing relationship that is God." –Burns and Taylor in *Confirmation*, found in Jackson's book

Recommended books on listening include:

Jackson, Cari. *The Gift to Listen, The Courage to Hear*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003.

Justus, Emma, "*Hearing Beyond the Words: How to Become a Listening Pastor*", Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006

Lindahl, Kay; *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening*, Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003

Miller, Wendy, *Learning to Listen: A Guide for Spiritual Friends*, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1993

Steere, Douglas V. *On Listening to Another*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955.