

I. EDUCATION AND EVANGELISM: IS THE CONNECTION ESSENTIAL?

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Education and evangelism have been linked ever since Jesus charged the twelve to go make disciples, baptize them, and “[teach] them to obey everything I have commanded you . . .” (Matt. 28:19-20, italics mine). Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. The text probably does not mean that things should always be done in that order, but it does suggest that, in relation to the proclamation of the gospel—or we could say evangelism—making disciples, baptizing, and teaching are closely connected. To say that evangelism and teaching—or education—are connected, however, is not to say that they are the same thing.¹

Both words—*evangelism* and *education*—suggest a variety of meanings. One source reports that there have been over three hundred definitions of the concept “evangelize” offered in print.² Evangelism often conjures up images of street-corner preachers, altar calls, or even knocking on doors to invite people to church. These forms of evangelism make many people uncomfortable. But, there is another, more holistic way to think about the matter. The authors of the book *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*³ argue that evangelizing is central to the heart of the church’s life and ministry. It occurs through the spoken Word, through the sacraments, and in the life of the Christian community. It is making the gospel known in both the church and the world. And rather than being the task of the clergy alone, evangelizing is integral to the baptismal vocation of all Christians.⁴ These authors prefer the word “evangelizing” to “evangelism,” because the meaning of the latter is too often limited to matters of program and method—for example, knocking on doors as a congregation’s sole concept of evangelism. Evangelizing, in this sense, lies at the heart of what the church is. That is the understanding that we will work with here.

If this is what we mean by evangelism, then, what is the connection with education?

What Do We Mean by Education?

The word *education* is not very popular in church circles these days. “I don’t like to talk in terms of ‘education,’” I heard someone say not too long ago. “It’s just about head stuff. Faith is more about the heart.” Or, for another example, in a recent book exploring what kind

of church might be needed in the twenty-first century, the author takes issue with what he calls the “education formation” model. Instead, he chooses to use the term *spiritual formation*, by which he means “how people become Christian and live in faith.”⁵ Education, the book argues, is too concerned with right belief, or the basics of the faith. The author suggests that spiritual formation is a more holistic way of helping people integrate faith into all areas of their lives.⁶

Spiritual formation is just one term that people are substituting for *Christian education*. Other descriptions include faith formation, faith nurture, discipleship, and lifelong learning. A person I talked with not long ago suggested that we replace “education” with “teaching and learning,” because the former carries too many negative connotations.

What is the primary concern here? The widely reported decline in membership in mainline churches may be part of the problem. As people look at the decreasing numbers, they are asking questions. Why do so many people seem to be dropping out of church, especially our younger members? Where are they going? Have we been doing a good job of passing on the faith to our children in a way that invites them to understand and experience what it really means in our lives and theirs? These are real and complex questions. Perhaps because children and youth are too often seen as the primary participants in programs of Christian education—though adults surely belong there as well—those very programs are easy targets for blame as we search for answers.

Others argue that education does not seem to be doing the job it is intended to do. Why is it, they ask, that so many people do not know the stories of the Bible or are unable to articulate the basic tenets of the faith and what they mean for their lives, even after years of attending Sunday school? Does the church need something other than education to solve this problem? Or does the answer lie elsewhere?

Perhaps another reason that the notion of education carries negative connotations for many people is that they equate education with schooling. Some may be reminded of negative experiences from their own school days, experiences that made them uncomfortable, or were even hurtful. In American culture today, education often is not seen in a positive light. The public perception fed by the media, whether accurate or not, is that our schools are failing. Many people simply do not like school or do not trust schools to do the job of educating children. Because Christian education has often taken the form of schooling, it may be included in the general sense of unhappiness that some people feel toward schools.⁷

For whatever reason, many are looking for other language to use to talk about the teaching ministry of the church. All of the alternative words and concepts for Christian education that have been proposed are good ones, and they each have some relation to education. Many people express concern for the matter of growing in faith or in the life of faith, and for helping people integrate faith and life. And most want to emphasize that faith is about more than the ability to articulate beliefs, or simply “head knowledge,” as some would say. It is also a matter of the heart and hand. Several of the alternative concepts suggested

are broader than education. *Formation, nurture, and discipleship* may fall into this category. *Teaching and learning* simply name the primary activities of education. And *lifelong learning* is a reminder that education in faith is intended for more than children and youth. It should continue throughout the lifespan. Let us look at a few of these terms in more depth.

Formation—or sometimes *spiritual formation* or *faith formation*—is a popular term right now. It is often understood to refer to the entirety of an individual's experience in a particular community that shapes one's way of life. Formation involves a person's interactions with the relationships, practices, narratives, and norms that incorporate the identity of a community.⁸ Formation is about the process of becoming a thinking, feeling, and acting person. If we take the congregation as one example of such a formative community, we could say that the formation of individuals into a life of faith occurs through all of the ways in which they participate in the faith community. Persons are shaped through the ways that the identity of a particular congregation is expressed in its worship, fellowship, mission, and service opportunities, as well as those experiences that are specifically educational, there is a great deal of interest in the role that parents play in the faith formation of their children. The family is obviously another formative community, but its role in faith formation is played out in relation to the larger context of the faith community.

Education is certainly formative, and should be. And Christian educators would do well to pay attention to the unique formative aspects of their work and their relationship to the life of the larger faith community. Formation is a necessary component in growth in the life of faith. It is an inevitable outcome of being with and interacting with individuals in their never-ending process of becoming Christian. But, although education is almost always an integral part of the formative process, it has a particular role to play. Formation is a larger concept. We should note, also, that formation may carry negative overtones. The faith community must always ask itself a number of important questions: Who is doing the forming? By what authority? Is it coercive? Does the individual being formed understand what is happening? Where is the gospel present? Most of our formative experiences in the church would not be seen in this negative light, but the possibility is there.

The concept *nurture* is another term that has broader connotations than "education." It often suggests metaphors of planting seeds and helping to grow strong healthy plants. In relation to Christian education, it usually refers to the idea of tending carefully to people's growth in the life of faith. The use of the term *nurture* in connection with Christian education may have originated in the nineteenth century with Horace Bushnell who argued, "That the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."⁹ Bushnell was reacting to the revivalist mentality, so popular in his day, that held that baptized children needed a dramatic conversion experience at some point in life before they could be fully admitted to membership in the church and to the Lord's table. Bushnell's strong emphasis on the role of parents in nurturing the faith of the child is an idea that is again finding a place in educational circles in the church.

Since Bushnell's day, it is also not uncommon to hear all that we do in Christian education referred to as nurture. This term is often used in a way similar to formation in that the intent is that faith is nurtured—or grows—through all of our experiences in the life of the faith community and through the efforts of parents at home. The concept *nurture* offers strong images of love and care that are necessary to growing and understanding faith. In that sense, it does not carry the coercive connotation that can be associated with formation. Although it, too, is a broader concept than education, its meaning should not be lost on those concerned about education in the church. The love and care at the heart of the gospel must certainly find expression in the educational process in the faith community.

The popularity of the term *discipleship* in relation to the ministry of education may derive from the fact that its meaning is so clearly related to learning. The Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, means “learner.” It suggests an apprentice or pupil related to a particular teacher or movement. Disciples sit at the feet of the master.¹⁰ And, of course, the master from whom we in the church learn is Jesus. Discipleship suggests that we are learning the “way” of the one whom we follow. Disciples are learners *and* followers. Those who prefer this term may do so because of its emphasis on the *life* of discipleship. It reminds us that learning about the faith involves more than ideas. It is also concerned with how we live.

Christian educators should not ignore any of these terms or their connotations when they consider their ministry. *Formation* reminds us that we must attend to the role of the entire faith community as we plan for teaching and learning. *Nurture* lifts up the significance of caring concern in the educational process. And *discipleship* calls attention to learning and following the way of the One who calls us. Education is a part of each of these concepts and each has a role to play in educational ministry. But education itself has something unique to offer the church. That is why we need to look at this specific ministry: Jesus told his disciples to go and teach, and teaching is at the heart of education.

The reason that so many are looking for other names to describe the church's teaching ministry may have to do, not so much with the activity of education itself, but with how we understand this term and what we expect education to do. What are we talking about when we refer to the church's ministry of education? What do we hope it will do for the faith community and for individual Christians?

What Is the Educational Ministry of the Church?

There are probably as many definitions for *education* as there are for *evangelism*. For some people, education is all of our life's experience. They would say that we are learning all the time; that everything we do is educational. In relation to Christian education, the argument is, simply, that by being part of the faith community and experiencing its life and practices, people are being educated in faith. The experience of being in community together is inherently educational.¹¹

Others, as mentioned earlier, understand education in terms of schooling. If some define everything we do as education, those who understand education as schooling would confine it to structured learning experiences with designated teachers, usually taking place in clearly defined classrooms, and involving lesson plans, textbooks, and learning activities.

There is truth in both of these ways of understanding education, though each of them has problems as well. While we do learn from all of our experiences, there is always the possibility that we may misunderstand, or draw the wrong conclusion. Consequently, I would suggest that education has an element of intentionality about it. We plan for it and expect that something significant will happen to learners as a result of our plans. We hope for definite learning outcomes, though those outcomes can never be guaranteed. Nor is the learning limited to what we have planned. Often in the process, much more occurs than we had ever intended or hoped.

The life experience of our students may well become part of our intentional educational process. Our experience in all of life, including the life of faith, is a rich, educational resource. Our plans may call for learners to reflect on their experience in order to learn from it. But, in the educational process, learning is most effective when it results from interaction with others with whom we can test our ideas and receive the benefit of their experience and wisdom in return. Education is not only intentional, it is also relational. It occurs in the presence of and in interaction with others. In the church, the community of faith becomes the context for our learning and becomes a partner in the process. There we bring the scriptures and the historical faith tradition into the conversation as well. We engage in education when we are in intentional conversation in relationship with other teachers and learners about our experience as the people of God in light of the church's tradition.

That reflection may occur in classrooms, but it is not limited to that context. We need to distinguish between education and schooling. Although education is intentional, and we certainly hope that it is occurring in all of our schools, including Sunday schools, it is important to remind ourselves that education is not identical to schooling. For approximately the last two hundred years, the church has relied on Sunday school as its primary model for education in faith. However, education can happen through conversation anywhere—in classrooms and living rooms, in committee meetings and choir rehearsals, at camps or retreats, and even in the car on the way to the retreat. In fact, in the church, education *must* take place in many different contexts. The Sunday school, though still playing a vital role in the church's educational ministry, cannot do the job alone. The task is too big and too complex in today's world. We need a larger understanding of educational ministry, one that recognizes that education in the church is occurring wherever and whenever people of faith are intentionally engaged in conversation about the church's tradition in relation to their own experience.

Education in the church and elsewhere is fundamentally about helping people understand. It is a response to the question, "What does this mean?" What does it mean

to be a Christian? To be a follower of Jesus? To live one's faith in all of life? That kind of understanding is deep and multifaceted. It goes beyond the simply cognitive, or "head knowledge." It is personal and interpersonal. It is shaped by our emotions, and it reshapes them in return. Understanding is more than simply knowing, although it involves knowledge. It moves from the facts themselves to what those facts mean. It does not stop at what we believe, but asks why we believe what we do and what is the significance of our beliefs.

Understanding involves being able to use what we know creatively and flexibly in a variety of contexts and situations. In relation to faith, it involves integrating belief into our practice of the faith so that belief and practice are consistent with each other—what we often refer to as applying faith to life. Sometimes understanding requires that we step outside of ourselves in order to get a wider perspective on our beliefs or ideas, to test our own point of view and assumptions against those of others. At other times, we must walk in the shoes of the other in an attempt to feel as they might feel or see as they might see. Here, understanding calls for empathy. Understanding requires that we involve all of our selves. This kind of understanding is *mindful* faith, or to put it another way, loving God with our minds.¹² But, it is not just about head knowledge. As one lay theologian stated, "If I love Jesus, I want to learn as much as I can about him. Book-larnin' (*sic*) is not pitted against spirituality, or a substitute for it, but is a natural tendency of the heart."¹³

Understanding takes many forms. Understanding the doctrine of justification is a different matter from understanding Handel's *Messiah*. The process of understanding another person is not the same thing as understanding how to pray. What does it mean to understand God? Understanding does not happen all at once; it truly is lifelong. As the writer to the Corinthians suggests, in matters of faith, we will not fully understand until we "see face to face" (1 Cor. 13: 12-13).

There are times when we discover that we have misunderstood something that we thought we knew well. Understanding may occasionally involve a change of mind or even a change of heart. The path to understanding may lie in our willingness to admit our lack of understanding. It often requires that we be open to ideas and to persons who represent viewpoints that differ from our own. "We should be teachable, honest, [having] integrity. Knowledge puffs up, but we should recognize the limits of our knowledge and not think that we have it all figured out."¹⁴ Understanding, in this sense, is a form of conversion. It is a continuing process of learning and re-learning in relation to the journey of faith.¹⁵

This concept of education is more a process than a program. It is an ongoing conversation among teachers and learners around a subject in which each has a role to play. The goal is to lead toward broader and deeper comprehension and appropriation by the learner—and also by the teacher—in search of understanding. In the process, even the subject matter might be changed, as teachers and learners discover new ways to make sense of it in light of their own context and experience.¹⁶

Education and Faith

I believe that we need to maintain the language of education to name and describe what is an essential ministry in the church. Education clearly has something to do with faith. But what is the nature of that relationship. Is faith learned? If so, how? If not, what role does education play in relation to faith? And if education is primarily about understanding, what is it that we need to understand?

The word *faith* is another concept that resists simple definition. It is often said that everyone has faith of some kind. All believe in something and place trust somewhere—in wealth, family, job, country, whatever. Faith, in this sense, is essentially a human activity. But, from the Christian perspective, faith begins with God who calls us into relationship. Because of human sin, that relationship is possible only because God has taken the initiative to reach out to us by making God's self known through Jesus the Christ. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we discover who God is and who God is calling us to be. Faith is a response to God's initiative. Faith is the recognition and acceptance of the grace that is offered to us by God, which results in a desire to live a unique way of life based on gratitude, trust, and commitment. Faith itself is not something "learned." It is a gift that we receive with joy and thanksgiving.

Education is a response to the question, "What does this mean?" Education results from the desire to understand God and to comprehend what it means to live the life of faith to which God is calling us. Christian educator, Sara Little writes in her book, *To Set One's Heart: Belief and Teaching in the Church*, that the questioning of meaning is at the heart of being human: "We need to be more deliberate in our approach to helping persons claim the Christian inheritance in such a way that they can come to know who they are and why they are."¹⁷ The ELCA Task Force on Education (see chapter 12) has said that the Church's specific ministry in education is to instruct and form faithful and wise disciples to live out their baptismal vocation in the Church and world. The answer to *who* we are is: we are disciples of Jesus Christ. The answer to *why* we are is: to live out our baptismal vocation in the church and also in the world. Who we are—our identity—and why we are—our vocation—provide a focus for evangelizing and a purpose for education in the church. The search to understand what these questions mean and how they are to be answered brings us to the heart of the Christian faith and is the essence of educational ministry.

Content, Beliefs, and Practices

Where do we go in our search to understand these matters? We go to the church's tradition. We study the scriptures; we consider how the church has answered our questions through its history; we examine our confessional documents; we engage our own experience in conversation with all of these resources. Our faith has a content that is found in the story told in the scriptures and the church's teachings through the ages. That content offers us a language in the form of beliefs and practices that allows us to name and describe the life of faith.

Christian education is often criticized for focusing too much on teaching beliefs or doctrine without paying attention to what they mean in our daily lives. The argument is that too much attention is paid to sterile content and not enough to living faith. Although there may be some truth to that accusation, the corrective to the problem is not to ignore content altogether. Knowing what we believe is not all there is to faith, but a faith without knowledge of belief and meaning is empty and easily misguided.

Sara Little offers a holistic understanding of belief and its relation to faith, defining belief generally as “*an idea held (thought and experienced) to be true.*”¹⁸ We hold beliefs about many things, and those beliefs are derived from many sources and experiences. But, *Christian* beliefs are rooted in the Christian tradition. They have to do with how we understand ourselves and our world in relation to the God we know in Jesus Christ. For Little, faith and belief are not identical. Faith is always the primary category. “Faith is a trust, loyalty, confidence, but it is more than a ‘feeling.’ It is a trust qualified by the One who is trusted. It is, in fact, a gift from that One who reveals himself.”¹⁹

Belief becomes the path by which we appropriate, at deeper and deeper levels, what our faith means as we explore our faith tradition in light of our own experiences. Belief grows out of faith and, in turn, reshapes it. Believing is not just thinking, though thought is clearly involved. Belief involves not only our minds, but also our emotions, our actions, and our wills. Beliefs are not just ideas that we hold, but ideas that we *are*. Little lifts up the word *credo*, which is usually translated as “I believe.” Its literal meaning is “I set my heart.” It is a move from “believing that” to “believing in.”²⁰ That is the kind of belief that transforms lives and gives meaning and direction to faith. Formation of that kind of belief is the reason for teaching in the church.

More recently, attention has been drawn to another dimension of the faith—its practices, the things that Christians do that shape a way of life. There are a variety of formal definitions for “practice.” The one first offered by Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra is: “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”²¹ There are also multiple lists of Christian practices, which include such things as worshipping, praying, offering hospitality, discernment, healing, keeping Sabbath, giving testimony, practicing justice, forgiving one another, and shaping community.²² These practices can be traced back to the beginnings of the church. They are entangled in the activities of everyday human life. The doing of them connects us to God and to each other. They must be learned, which means that they have a significant place in the church’s educational ministry.

Belief and practice are not two entirely separate categories of faith. Rather, they are inextricably linked to one another. Though this linkage is complex and sometimes flawed (that is to say, our practices do not always truly reflect what we believe, and what we profess is not always lived out in our practice), we are still able to say that our practices shape what we believe, and our beliefs, in turn, shape our practices.²³ Just as the understanding takes a lifetime of education, so surely does integration of faith and practice. Education is, in part,

a process of discerning truth. It is a continual process of asking whether the beliefs we confess truly reflect the God whom we know in Jesus Christ and whether our practices are an authentic living out of that faith. In all that we say and do, are we being faithful people? The effort to understand the meaning of our beliefs and the form of our practices should help us claim our identities and live out our vocations in response to God's call.

An educational process that focuses on belief and practice must be situated in the center of the community of faith, because that is their source. The act of worship, for example, cannot be fully understood without actually participating in the worshipping life of a faith community. At the same time, there are many aspects of worship that we cannot comprehend without someone teaching us about them—such things as what do the particular elements of the liturgy mean and, why are those elements arranged in the order that they are? In today's entertainment culture, people often have trouble understanding what religious worship is and what role they play; that they are the actors and not the audience, and that worship is about God, not just about themselves. This knowledge is not necessarily intuitive. Worship consists of both belief and practice. We cannot fully understand either dimension without both intentional teaching and experiencing worship in community.

One final word on education and faith: Education is not just about receiving the faith tradition; it is also about questioning it and adapting it in response to new situations and contexts. Our teaching must incorporate elements of both continuity and change. Education in the church serves both to initiate persons into the tradition and to help persons adapt that tradition to changing social and historical contexts. Initiation may apply especially to children and to newcomers to the faith, perhaps even to those who are not yet ready to commit to it. In *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass tells of congregations who welcome into their study groups “doubting Thomases”—people who are not yet sure about the faith, but who are interested enough to ask probing questions. Bass suggests that, too often, churches discourage those questions by offering easy answers too quickly before people have had a chance to articulate their doubts and questions and to wrestle with the complexities of relating faith to the dilemmas they face in their everyday lives.²⁴ Could the practice of making room for questioning in educational contexts in the church be a form of evangelizing?

The challenge of understanding what our faith means in a rapidly changing world calls for the use of playful imagination in an educational process where continuity with the faith tradition is balanced by the possibility of change. As we experience new realities in our world and in our personal lives—cultural and ethnic diversity in our neighborhoods, a global economy, terrorism and war, a new baby, job loss, the death of a friend, marriage, divorce, and more—we struggle to figure out how our beliefs and practices can meet the new challenges that are presented. The Christian faith has never been a fixed tradition. After Jesus left the disciples, they had to figure out what to do next, and the church was born. Martin Luther questioned the practices of the church in his day, and the result was

the Protestant Reformation. Change for us may not be as dramatic or as cataclysmic, but it is a continuing reality.

We are called to engage our imaginations in playful ways to try out new possibilities of understanding and practicing faith. According to one educator, “Imagination is the capacity to think of things as possibly being so.”²⁵ In a world that often seems devoid of faith or in which the church is seen as irrelevant, the need for imagination to believe in and understand a God of grace may be absolutely necessary. An understanding of authentic discipleship in this consumer-oriented, media-saturated culture calls for an active imagination to envision another way of living in relation to each other and to God. We need to imagine that our faith just might possibly be true and to translate what we discover about our faith in scripture and the church’s tradition into a living reality in the contemporary world.

Education and Evangelism

So what is the relationship between education and evangelizing? They are not identical. Evangelizing is making the gospel known in church and world. It is similar to proclamation understood in the broadest sense—proclamation in the form of both spoken word and lived experience. Education focuses on understanding the gospel and how it shapes who we are and the way we live our lives. Clearly, we cannot draw too fine a distinction between these two essential ministries of the church. As people hear the gospel proclaimed, they often come to understand, in profound ways, who God is and who they are. And the gospel is made known in countless ways, both intentionally and unintentionally, in educational settings in the faith community. Clearly both are needed in the church and the world. The difference is one of focus and purpose, not importance.

Although education is not the same thing as evangelizing, it is absolutely essential to it. Education invites people to understand and claim their identity as baptized children of God and to clarify their vocation as people called by God to live lives characterized by love of God and neighbor. Education helps people articulate the meaning of the gospel for themselves, for others, and for the world. In this way, education prepares those already in the church to share the gospel. And the ministry of education provides a venue for those who are newly welcomed into the faith community to understand what it is to which they have committed their lives. For them, it offers a language of belief and practice with which to name their experience of the gospel that has been proclaimed to them and around which they can structure their lives as disciples of Christ.

“Go therefore and make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . and teaching them” (Mt. 28:19–20).

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. What terminology do you use to name educational ministry in your congregation? Why have you chosen it? How does the language you use shape the way you carry out your educational ministry?
2. What impact has educational ministry had on your faith? Recall places and people who were part of those education experiences.
3. How has your understanding of faith changed throughout your lifetime? How has education, in the broadest sense, played a role in that process?

Parish Strategies

1. With a group of people interested in educational ministry, talk about where education, formally and informally, is happening in your congregation, beyond the Sunday school. In what contexts is it happening, formally and informally, beyond the congregation? How can education become integrated more fully into the life of the whole church?
2. With the same group of people, or another group, if appropriate, talk about the potential of integrating a focus on beliefs and practices into your educational ministry. How could giving attention to specific practices of faith strengthen your ministry of education and help people grow in the life of faith?.



Education is not only intentional, it is also relational.