

CRITICAL APPROACHES - EDUCATION FOR CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION WITHIN THE CHURCH

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Introduction

Education for change is fundamental to any process of change within an existing group or organization but it is often neglected; local church congregations are no exception. In the average small church setting here in North America, pastors are usually called to work with local congregations with the specific challenge of growing the church or bringing the church to a state of spiritual health rather than see the church diminish further and inevitably close. While there has been much written about principles of church growth, theorists tend to generalize the individual dynamics of the people grouped together in the local church setting to the point of futility. Ministers cannot implement growth principles without first understanding the requisite process of change necessary to bring about any kind of growth to the group. Additionally, this process of change must embody deliberate educational process that involves every participant for the sake of successful change. Part of this educational process includes the challenge to established definitions of power, the introduction of the language for change, the negotiation of the role of the participants, and the restructuring of systems. Together, each of these aspects of the process of education for change must be addressed and managed if effective change is to occur.

Simon (1992) characterizes such educational strategies as “progressive pedagogies” strategies aimed at encouraging ways of thinking and “structures of feeling” that allow and support actions that express an, “ethically informed expansion of human possibility” (p.47). In order to succeed, he suggests several issues which must be considered: learning and its relation to the question of power; the pedagogical relation between educators and learners we engage in the process; and how we present our own views and our own structures of feeling. Simon claims that a progressive pedagogy will not develop if the educator is only concerned with making people think as s/he does (Simon, 1992). How one approaches knowledge provides a beginning point for the various approaches that frame an education that leads to change.

Absolute knowledge

Agents of change, within an existing church organization or structure, must not only be committed to a process of educational change, they must also be aware that knowledge itself must be redefined if change is to be facilitated. Redefining knowledge remains a fundamental problem with education in the church. As religious beliefs are usually based on a view of an absolute, all-powerful God, often the approach to learning is that there is an absolute body of knowledge which must be transmitted entirely from one generation to the next, without change or question. Even if such a body of knowledge exists, and it was possible to transmit it entirely to another individual, concern should lie with the failure to realize the impossibility of maintaining neutrality throughout. No knowledge can remain absolute if it is affected by subjective perceptual changes. Failure to recognize this critically, can lead to the imposition of one view on another. In addition, if those views are representative of the dominant group within the society of the church, this can lead to not only social, but religious conditioning of the people. This, therefore, leaves little room for critical inquiry or personal interpretation and perception, let alone change for the future.

Teacher-student relationships

Confusion can develop in a religious context due to the appeal to the sacred text as the source of all knowledge. In the Christian religion, the sacred text is the Judeo-Christian Bible. In most Christian churches, this text is held as divinely inspired and non-negotiable. This can lead to the attitude that anyone who teaches the scripture is the link with the Eternal. As the minister is traditionally the main spiritual teacher within the group, this attitude is especially noticeable towards him/her. What develops from this is an incredibly static relationship between the teacher and the student. That is, one has the knowledge and one does not; one is the transmitter and one is the receiver.

In order for a collaborative relation of power to be developed, it is important that the teacher, as well as the student, be involved in the learning process, and this relationship should be targeted from the outset. Bell Hooks suggests that the involvement of the teacher should be as a catalyst, "that calls everyone to become more and more engaged to become active participants" (Hooks, 1994 p. 11). Therefore, it is quite understandable to see that a theologically trained minister would have more knowledge than a lay person regarding some aspects of scriptural history and structure, and can, then, act as guide to the learner. However, if the learning process is to be successful, then both the teacher and the learner must be engaged together as active participants.

Individual response

Within the framework of a church, most education takes the form of religious, rather than spiritual education. If there is a context where spiritual education could be fostered, it is the church, yet, as in other human institutions, the church can become more concerned with a perpetuation of a system, than the growth and development of the individual. Hooks refers to the importance of sharing in the intellectual and spiritual growth of students as well as being concerned with sharing information with them. In other words, the teacher must be willing to transgress the boundaries that keep students bound in rote, assembly-line learning (Hooks, 1994). Education should be a practice of freedom, rather than a reinforcement of cultural biases and systems of domination. This, however, is very difficult to negotiate in a church context where people are often more concerned with the transmission of "truth", than with the engaged learning of an individual. In fact, as this kind of engagement requires critical inquiry, it can be strongly *discouraged* within the church.

Religion versus spirituality

Moffett (1989) states,

As its root meaning suggests, religion aims to tie the individual back to some apparent reality from which he or she has been diverted by, presumably, people and other attractive hazards in the environment (p.70).

Spirituality, on the other hand, Moffett suggests is the "...oneness behind plurality", and that spiritual behavior is the "acting on this perception" (Moffett, 1989 p. 71). There is a less philosophical view of spirituality that involves personal response. Within a religious context, this would be the kind of response that involves every aspect of one's being and not only an intellectual pursuit of religiosity. In order for a religious belief to be a relevant part of an individual's life, that individual must be engaged on a spiritual level in his/her learning process.

It could be argued, then, that the main reason why people are not being engaged in their spiritual learning process is because they have never been critically awakened to the relationship between themselves and the religion in which they participate. This applies to all areas of church life and ministry. Henderson (1995) discusses liturgical formation in regard to spiritual engagement. He states, "Christian worship or liturgy calls for the full participation of the worshippers" (p.114). Henderson suggests that liturgical formation as it is carried out today [he is mainly referring to the Catholic Church] is inadequate, and that, if it was approached using principles and methods involved in critical thinking, it would be more successful. If participants were more critically aware of what they were doing, and if they were encouraged to become spiritually engaged learners, they would be more actively involved in worship itself. The basis for this critical approach, according to Henderson, is a) identifying and challenging assumptions, and b) exploring and imagining alternatives (Henderson, 1995). Often what prevents the exploration of different approaches to worship within the church is a fear that in so doing, the truth will be lost and strange and unfamiliar influences will be encouraged. This fear of losing the faith creates a stale, lifeless repetition, rather than a living, exciting reality. Henderson makes an interesting comment in this regard, "Critical thinking is concerned with transformation of lives, which is a central gospel value. It looks to an alternative future, in which the reign of God is a central Bible image" (p.117).

Spiritual Education: censorship and controlled knowledge

Moffett (1989) states that, "a spiritual education could accomplish moral and religious education without moralizing or indoctrinating" (p.71). That is, it is not the belief itself that is at issue, but the methods with which it is handled and taught. Moffett suggests that, contrary to popular opinion, the less manipulation of minds, the more there is likely to be a spiritual response (Moffett, 1989). Within a church context, it is often believed that the more freedom is given to the learner, the more confusion will follow. Therefore, a tight control must be kept on curriculum and information, if the learner is to stay within the faith. Moffett (1989) continues that the learner must be put into a position of responsible decision making and in "unplanned interaction" with other people, if they are to spiritually respond. Many Christian parents home-school their children or have them attend a Christian private school, in an attempt to control their environment and to allow the successful continuation of Christian values and lifestyle. This motivation is little more than religious reproduction as, if a child cannot remain a Christian in any environment, then that child/person has never spiritually engaged with the faith.

The fear of change and diversity of perspective is what leads many fundamentalist movements in every religion to support and practice censorship. There exists a fear that critical literacy will lead the individual away from the truth, hence the need to control, and censor. The Christian church has long been interested in promoting literacy wherever it has had the opportunity to do so, yet, at the same time, has been aware that literacy opens doors which are previously shut and presents opportunities for learning and development which previously did not exist. Therefore, along with literacy comes the need for fundamentalist groups to control with rules and regulations what otherwise have the potential of offering a wealth of knowledge and opportunity. According to Moffett,

The net effect of this ambivalence [referring to literacy in schools] is to give literacy with one hand and to take it back with the other, in keeping with a contradictory wish for youngsters to learn to think but only what we already have in mind for them (p.85).

Moffett emphasizes the importance of teachers educating students to have their own thoughts, to link beyond the constraints of their own culture in order to be able to change and transform it (Moffett, 1989). The church culture is also one where individuals should be empowered to change through transformation. If any culture is to progress, then individuals must be encouraged to transcend the boundaries of that culture in order to transform it and lead it into the future.

Spiritual education for children in a church

Traditionally, children are involved in a highly content-driven program of learning within the church, largely due to the belief in faith reproduction. As a result, parents usually want their children to “know” the Bible and that means, for them, the memorizing of huge portions of text without any focus on interpretation or application. It is difficult to see, however, how such learning could ever help a child to discover any spiritual truth for themselves or to develop a living faith which has relevance to the world around. Thus, exactly what is feared happens. As soon as the child is old enough, church and the faith are discarded. Brinkley (1995) speaks about this parental fear. She refers to the importance of religious writing and, in particular, the Bible as the source of all knowledge as is the belief of such parents. As a result of this belief, any other literature is treated with suspicion and is often opposed simply because it is not scripturally based. Brinkley comments,

English educators are often amazed at the intense commitment that challengers bring to their battles. Such commitment is more understandable, however, given that parent protesters sometimes think their children's eternal destiny is at stake (Brinkley, 1995).

It must be realized that if one's religion remains an irrelevant belief system, then it is of no use to the individual or anyone else. Each child should be given the opportunity for critical inquiry and if this involves analyzing other written material than the Bible, then that should be encouraged. The Bible, then, becomes much more meaningful as it is absorbed in an active learning environment and the faith of the individual has the opportunity of becoming meaningful in everyday life, rather than only in church.

Spiritual education for teens within a church

Generation X and now, *Millennium Youth* and *Generation Y* have been labeled and characterized by sociologists on various levels and attributed various characteristics that differ from previous generations. Mostly emerging from cultures of new technology, high connectivity and direct communication, these young people demonstrate different needs, views of the world, and values of community that those before. Generational expectations and behaviors result from processes of thought and ideological frameworks. In most church organizations, processes of change occur too slowly to keep the generations fully engaged. Unlike older generations (60+), younger generations will no longer come out of respect for tradition. Unless they are given an opportunity for spiritual development and inter-relational re-enforcement, newer generations will continue to walk away from the church. Matt DeJong (1996), a youth minister in Ontario, Canada, talks about the necessity of a mentoring program for youth and young adults. The mentor must enter the world of the teen, according to DeJong, rather than wait for the teen to enter the world of the adult. The mentor should be willing to share personal struggles and difficulties with the teen, in order to create a deeper sense of learning together and developing a spiritual awareness in the context of the real world. DeJong insists that teens learn more when they experience what they are learning. Another interesting observation offered by DeJong is that teens are motivated to learn when they do not know the answer, and that doubt is necessary, not

harmful to spiritual growth. That is, when the original paradigms are challenged, teens are able to construct their faith, rather than accept a list of prescribed standards. It seems little wonder that so many young people are missing from church. Traditionally, they have been offered no such learning environment. Rather, they have been given non-negotiable answers, before they have even asked the questions.

Spiritual education for adults

Adults need to develop their own sense of spiritual response to their faith, in order for that faith to become relevant for them, their family and their community. Bedard (1995) suggests,

Christians who were raised in this context [i.e. hierarchical control] and highly conditioned by the omnipresence of an ecclesiastical establishment in all religious matters - whatever their age or social condition - were deprived of their responsibility for religious growth and for spiritual development. (p.224)

She continues that in "...all religious education matters, most Christians have been conditioned to blindly trust their pastors" (p.225). The result of this, of course, is that pastors, then, are in a position of dictatorial control, while their followers have relinquished responsibility of their own spiritual education. Thus, "...their Christian identity was seized, their moral individuality was denied, and their spiritual experience denied" (p.225). Bedard promotes self-directed learning as a useful way to spiritually engage and to develop an individual religious experience, noting, "it is spiritual experience that gives us back to ourselves. What belonged to us is given back; our freedom as children of God" (p.223).

De Roo (1995), notes the church as being a wonderful place to promote this kind of learning and spiritual development instead of stifling it. Church is open to everyone and it should empower people to individually and collectively bring about realistic and lasting changes within the church itself and within society in general. DeRoo links adult faith development and social change by saying that, "...lifelong education is both an important and a moral enterprise." (DeRoo, 1995) DeRoo suggests that the alienation from church among youth and younger adults may have a positive aspect. This alienation, in his view, provides an opportunity to start over again and to work for spiritual renewal and change. DeRoo identifies this need for radical renewal as the proper domain of adult faith formation.

If any real change is to take place within church structures and in terms of future growth it is essential that the approach to education within the church is drastically altered. If individuals are to become involved and part of the planning and progress of the church, they must be encouraged to spiritually engage with the faith. Programs should be supported and implemented which will encourage this kind of engaged learning to take place. There must be an on-going commitment to individual development as anything can quickly become stale and irrelevant. Time is always a factor in church education programs. Most church teachers and leaders are in a volunteer capacity, and there is not always the time for adequate teacher development and preparation. The result of this can be quick curriculum choices based on time, rather than educational value. Therefore, it is important, in the realm of adult education to consistently encourage the individual's responsibility to spiritual development and to also emphasize the reality that spiritual growth and development does not only happen in church or church groups. Spirituality is part of all life experience and this is fundamental to true spiritual growth. In addition, if individual growth is the goal, and the teacher remains only a facilitator of a process, then each participant must come prepared to engage with the content and the other group members rather than attend with a closed mindset of stale expectations.

Transformational learning

The process of teaching and learning must be about building on what is known and forming what has yet to be formed, which is a dynamic process of integrating experience, information and knowledge building in a learning process of dynamic transformation for the learner. Friere (1970) talked of the importance of engaging the experiential reality of the individual learner in the process in order to achieve a transformative learning experience for the individual and society as a whole.

If individuals are excluded from their own learning, such transformation cannot take place (see also Cummins, 1996). The idea of transformational learning is not new, particularly in the context of this paper as it relates to Christian education. Jesus Christ demonstrated a commitment to transformational learning throughout his ministry. While his words are often quoted, his commitment to the actual learning of his followers that was demonstrated through applied social and personal change must also be noted. Without evidence of changed behavior through learning, it can be argued that no learning has actually taken place. Therefore, within the context of a church, if no change is taking place in individual and collective life contexts, the methods of education must be changed.

Symbolism and language

Certain rituals and items within a church have symbolic value. These could be anything from items of furniture, orders of religious service, ritualized traditions or events, religious clothes, titles, roles or positions. Some of these may have wider significance, while others remain only so for the immediate local church community. Nevertheless, if an ideological shift in the church organization is to take place, careful consideration must be given to this kind of symbolic value. Symbolism supports structure and, therefore, when structural change is desired it cannot be the objective to erase symbolism, but to understand the existing symbolic value system and to work within its confines to modify, redefine and even reinvent the symbolism to support the new structure being presented. It is important to emphasize, however, that change in symbolic representation is not all that is involved in changes of other forms of symbolic attribution or value. These are altogether more difficult to recognize, analyze and change because they are not surface or obvious. For example, an outward symbolic representation of a minister's role may be changed through the moving of a pulpit or through the title used, but there may still exist other more involved attitudes to the role which are also given symbolic value. How an individual views power, authority and reverence within a church can play a significant part in his/her relation to it and the symbolic importance he/she attaches to it. These attitudes are much more difficult to modify as they involve deep belief structures and traditions. Attitudes towards gender and race can also affect this kind of symbolic value. For example, if a woman sees herself as in subjection to the males in the church, then she will have difficulty recognizing her importance and value in terms of involvement and collaborative input to the overall power structure of the church; this will remain a difficulty even after outward symbolic representations have been altered. Also, an individual's attitude and response to authority will have symbolic effect within the church. For example, if a person believes in the ultimate authority and power of God, this may become transferred to his/her view of the minister's position, and, as the minister is seen as God's representative in the church, the symbolic support of that lofty position will be maintained regardless of any superficial changes. This kind of symbolic support for the minister's position within the church is given with or without the minister's deliberate intention.

Language plays a significant part in such symbolic construction and, therefore, deliberate language use and change can be extremely effective in this regard. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that, "Language is not only an instrument of communication or even knowledge, but also an instrument of power" (p.648). He also states,

Among the presuppositions of linguistic communication which most completely escape the attention of linguists are the conditions of its establishment, particularly the structure of the group within which it takes place. (p.650)

If the difficulty lies with how a minister is symbolically perceived, then it is important for an attempt to be made to redefine that perception in order that symbolic change is achieved. Language, as Bourdieu suggests, is an instrument of power. In my opinion, it can, therefore, defuse as well as infuse power. Symbolic changes must be sustained and managed, then, through language as well as through visible endorsement of it. Gal (1981) discusses the notion of constructed reality through language. She suggests, "...but as means of social action and representation, language cannot be contrasted with reality, since it partially constructs what is real in society" (p.359). A particular reality can be constructed through language while an old reality is deconstructed. It is also fascinating how something new can be so quickly absorbed as normal as it is consistently supported through language. While the notion of tradition is viewed as sacred within a church context, Hobsbawm's (1983) notion of "invented traditions" is interesting in this discussion of constructed reality through language. Hobsbawm suggests,

Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (p.14).

He suggests that this continuity is, where possible, with a "suitable historic past" (p.14). Therefore, just as a reality can be constructed through language choice, so tradition can be established through the repetition of certain values and behavior. Thus, the symbolic nature of these values and norms together with the repetition of them can actually suggest a past which may not even exist and, yet, be upheld as legitimate tradition.

Hobsbawm (1983) discusses the differences between 'custom', 'convention' and 'tradition', but he suggests that tradition, "...is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (p.4). It is interesting that the word 'tradition' itself, when used in conjunction with something else, provides this link with the past and, therefore, implies authenticity through history and practice, even if no link is actually provided. This is linguistic symbolism at its best. In the Christian context, 'tradition' symbolically links Christian history and practice and, therefore, suggests Biblical support even when that support cannot be actualized. This process becomes more problematic when it occurs at a very subtle level and often allowing the perpetuation of an attitude or behavior to exist without question.

For example, the infamous phrase "traditional family values" brings with it a suggestion of indisputable heritage and practice. The more critically aware, however, question the validity of such a term in the light of what the proponents of the term seem to mean. The publication *Context* (1994), which is produced by the Christian Relief organization, World Vision, presents an interesting aspect to this discussion. The term 'traditional family values', is often heard from dominant political groups and also from dominant church groups with the result that the words, 'traditional' and 'Christian' have often become synonymous. *Context* cites Rodney Clapp (1993) as saying that the list of threats to traditional family

values which is promoted by certain Christian family value advocates, such as pornography, drugs, public schools and secular humanism is really an inadequate explanation for much deeper social problems and weaknesses. Clapp suggests that one such social weakness is the economic system and the kinds of financial pressures it brings to bear on working individuals today. *Context* claims that few corporations pay a family wage necessary to meet the needs of today's employees. Therefore, young families today face more financial insecurity than any generation since the 1930's.

What ministers and social theorists often portray as the "traditional family" either does not exist, or represents only a privileged few. The majority of people simply cannot afford to have the mother stay home with the children (which is usually what is thought to be the traditional family) while the father remains the sole provider. In addition, tradition implies, an historic past made secure through repetition, yet it would seem that where it exists at all, it is a relatively new construct in the light of economic and social history. The pressures of the 1930's economic depression and the two world wars would suggest a time of stress and financial insecurity. In such times, the responsibility of children is most often shared within the extended family and even the community, rather than it held as a small unit of father, mother and children. It must also be stated that the term carries an extreme Eurocentric bias, as in many other cultures; there are possibly as many ways of defining family and family structure as existing cultures. Recognizing the limits of such a view of the "traditional family" not only critiques tacit understandings of the nature of the family. Critical analysis opens the door for change, so that ministries may be adapted to acknowledge and provide alternative strategies for ministries to families that rely on extended community support. People not only see the limitation of their assumptions, they can now change their approach to deeper, more holistic forms of ministry that engage systemic issues in society.

Summary

Christian education should address transformation through critical inquiry and applied change. In such a setting, change becomes an integrated part of the whole and an expected outcome rather than something imposed through necessity. Methods, procedures, policies are under constant scrutiny and all congregational participants are vital to the dynamic of the process. Additionally, spiritual education should emphasize individual engagement with the faith that demonstrates itself in a collective collaboration of progress rather than a rote following of traditions which may or may not actually represent a true historic faith tradition. Traditions that result from mindless repetition are not faith-based traditions and most often exclude new comers into the community as well as stunt any progress which should be made. In a transformative environment, traditions are understood within a relevant context, not idealized for ever simply out of repetition and individuals are encouraged to grow and change. In such a dynamic environment nothing remains stagnant and change is welcomed when it is needed. As a result, the organizational system of the church develops flexibility to incorporate each new generational challenges and vision. No one actually "owns" the process but engages with it. In such a setting, truth becomes a dynamic energy for the present, not a stale, irrelevant view from the past.

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