Faith Communities That Foster Children’s Growth in Faith and Spirituality

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*What are the characteristics of a faith community that is effective in nurturing the spirituality and faith of children?*

*What kind of leadership exists in such communities?*

*What do such communities value? What habits or practices sustain them?*

*How does their sense of mission relate to their practices of formation and education?*

First of all, I regret to say that I won’t be answering any of these questions today. But I can tell you about my research into them. I’ve been engaged in a national study for the Uniting Church in Australia on the future of Christian education in congregations and less formal faith communities, and combining that project with doctoral study through Flinders University. This paper is drawn from my ongoing research, based on interviews with key leaders from 22 churches across Australia. The leaders were surveyed using a semi-structured interview approach designed as a *social constructivist* inquiry, where attention is paid to how they make sense of what they are doing and why they are doing it. The research method follows the theological method of practical theology to explore how Christian education and faith formation are a ‘work in progress’ by churches.

The term *Christian education* is used here as an umbrella term to cover both formal and informal formation and education in Christian faith, so today I’m not going to distinguish between Christian education or formation, faith development and spiritual growth. One aspect of my study was to uncover the language that leaders and churches themselves use when talking about growth in faith or spirituality or belief.

My study has involved examining four areas:

1. The role of leadership in relation to Christian education
2. The nature of a congregation as a lifelong learning community
3. Their understandings of Christian education, spiritual growth, faith development, etc.
4. The relationship between the congregation’s sense of mission (participation in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God) in context and its Christian education

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2 The interviewees have given their permission to be identified in the study.
Today I will focus on the fourth area using the lens of contextual theology. I wanted to see whether churches that are effective in Christian education are intentionally reforming their approaches in the light of their experience of being Christian in their local context. Is there an interplay between faith formation and education on the one hand, and their theology and practice of ‘mission’ on the other? In terms of today’s symposium, what is the relationship between how faith communities view their context theologically and how they engage with children in terms of faith development or spiritual growth?

Michelle Cook and James Hughes are ministry workers in the aboriginal community of Mapoon, 90 kilometres north of Weipa. Michelle is an ordained minister with a Master’s degree in theology and a background in sociology and James is a theologically-educated youth worker and qualified pre-school teacher. The Mapoon community consists of 250 to 300 people, almost all indigenous, with about half of the community under 18 years of age. There’s a primary school, but the high school is a residential facility in Weipa. Michelle and James have multiple roles and involvements in the community, including playgroup, religious education and support for the community services workers in the town. The church congregation or faith community is made up of about 25 children aged 12 and under, and 5 to 10 adults.

Let’s listen to Michelle talking about their weekly worship gathering. Ask yourself what you hear about faith traditions, current faith practices, teaching and learning, and about culture or context.

[Video clip of Michelle]

So… trying to bring people in before the worship service to help lead it; trying to increase the Biblical literacy and to make church interactive, especially for that age. The main people that are there need to have a lot of interaction and a lot of opportunities for people to ask questions or to answer questions or to offer some insight into what’s happening. And some of the older adults are starting to contribute. So when we might ask a question about “What’s a bad spirit?” We ask them, “How do you know if something’s a bad spirit? And they were talking about people getting over-angry, and some of the adults were contributing to “And what’s a good spirit? How do you know it’s the Holy Spirit?” and that sort of thing, contributing to that, which is really, really good. 4

What did you hear about faith and culture?

This is a multi-dimensional picture of a faith community:

- Aboriginal elders who have had a very traditional Presbyterian experience of church and some with more recent Pentecostal experiences
- Children with limited background in the Christian tradition, yet whose faith is being shaped by elders, parents, and James and Michelle

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4 Interview with Michelle C. and James H., 23 May 2012.
• Some educational approaches that seem to be about basic literacy in Christian faith and practices
• Experimentation with multi-sensory, multiple intelligence learning
• Development of communal faith habits or practices
• An acknowledgement of indigenous culture in terms of language, importance of music, people’s notions of good and bad spirits

Now listen to both James and Michelle talking more explicitly about culture.

[Video clip of James and Michelle]

Because we don’t want to separate people’s faith from people’s culture, you know. For us and the theology of the Uniting and Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, the culture of the people is connected to the faith of the people, and always has been, and always will be, you know. So [for] some missionaries for some church groups, there’s a bit of a divide, says, “Oh, you can’t do that cultural stuff in church.” But for us, and for the Congress, that’s never been the case. Faith fits in very well with culture. 5

James talks about the importance of participating in and learning from the local culture, respecting its authority figures and its customs, and about the importance of faith and culture existing alongside one another in some kind of positive relationship.

While the example here is of a particular religion and a particular context, I’ve want to invite your reflection on how a faith community’s stance in relation to its culture or context shapes the way that it approaches faith development or spiritual nurture.

What if you were to shift James’ and Michelle’s sense of faith and culture to, say, North Ringwood or Dandenong?

Catholic theologian Stephan Bevans offers six models for doing contextual theology; expressing religious truth or experience across cultures.6 His thesis is that the task of theology is inevitably contextual, shaped by the culture of those who are doing it, but also that the ways in which we seek to communicate faith and belief across cultures have their own theological assumptions. 7

5 Interview with Michelle C. and James H., 23 May 2012
7 One of the problems that Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer see with religious education is that its main models are assumed to be independent of context. Richard Robert Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, Religious Education Between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany (W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003).
In terms of Bevans’ models, I’d like you to think about is what is assumed if you replace the notion of culture or context with the word “child” or “the world of the child.” Is there a relationship between how a church sees faith in relation to culture and how it views the spirituality of children?

**The Translation Model**
The unchanging core of the gospel (religious truth) is translated into meanings that can be understood by people in their particular context. The gospel is brought anew into a particular culture or context and coded into meaningful symbols.

**The Anthropological Model**
This model emphasises the goodness of the human person and his or her culture. It seeks for God’s presence or revelation within the culture, and then to provide background from text (Scripture) and tradition that helps people develop their own theology.

**The Praxis Model**
God is known not simply through a message or in the fabric of culture, but in reflective action on experience and history for the sake of social transformation. Theology is “an activity, a process, a way of living” - a work of the people as they seek healing, reconciliation and liberation in their context.  

**The Synthetic Model**
This model is a synthesis of the others: it seeks “to keep the integrity of the traditional message while acknowledging the importance of tasking all the aspects of context seriously.” Culture or context is ambivalent, neither good nor bad. Revelation or meaning is discovered in context and in history, so a dialogue between tradition and experience is needed.

**The Transcendental Model**
This model focuses on the religious experience of the person, and their (including their community’s) authentic experience of transformation. Culture or tradition are important insofar as they provide the resources for people to come to new understandings and awareness, to give voice to who we truly are.

**The Countercultural Model**
The gospel or message comes to challenge culture, which is not evil, but certainly flawed. Revelation is not about translation or indigenisation, but about encounter and engagement with culture. There is an emphasis on the faith community being prophetic, confessional, a contrast society, a peculiar people.

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9 Ibid., 89.
In the example from Mapoon that we’ve seen and heard, firstly there are elements of translation: seek to express the Christian message and tradition it in forms that make sense within Aboriginal culture. There is also a recognition that Aboriginal culture is of value in and of itself; it needs to be respected; others can learn from it; the divine may be known and experienced within it. In this brief example, the Synthesis Model seems to be dominant. However in other parts of the interview, particularly in relation to problems in indigenous communities and the need to form Christian identity, there are also elements of the Countercultural Model present.

The shaping of the spiritual lives of these children is a combination of complex elements:
- their social geographic setting
- their particular indigenous cultural heritage and practice
- schooling in a hybrid European-Aboriginal setting
- James and Michelle’s attempts at
  - translation of Christian faith into cultural forms
  - valuing local indigenous culture for its own sake
  - inviting faith engagement that question habits and understandings

The second example is an interview with Gordon Ramsay, minister at Kippax Uniting Church in north-western Canberra. This is congregation of fairly well-educated and middle to upper middle people who chose to relocate to one of Canberra’s most disadvantaged suburbs about 25 years ago. Two key factors are its decision several years ago to give a priority in ministry towards families with young children, resulting in the formation of playgroups and designing worship and learning opportunities for that group. Secondly, the congregation gave birth to a UnitingCare community services agency that provides a range of services to people experiencing difficulties.

[Video clip - Gordon Ramsay]

Gordon articulates a coherent connection between an incarnational theology of being alongside people in the wider community and the church’s sense of being community together. While the congregation runs programs for children, this theology informs their approach to “being” rather than doing, to valuing intergenerational relationships, to focussing on lived practices of faith above doctrinal teaching. I see in this both Bevans’ Synthetica Model, seeing faith and culture in relationship, and also his Transcendental Model which emphasises the individual in community as being a locus of transformation. Gordon also speaks of his preaching role as being prophetic, suggesting that transformative Praxis is also an aspect of their mission.
In a wonderful essay called “The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic,” Walter Brueggemann suggests that church leaders need to be bilingual; to be versed in the faith language of their religious community, and in the language of wider culture, and to be able to translate between them.  

I want to go further and suggest that in some congregations, the relationship between faith and context is an active dialogue that informs both mission and education (formation, etc.). This is not the same as saying that one needs a clear theology and methodology for faith development, Christian education or spiritual nurture. Rather it is about how faith and culture, tradition and context mutually inform one another in ways that hold formation/education and mission in creative dialogue, and the processes which support and resource this in a faith community.

In these two examples, I would go as far as to suggest that the way that the culture or context is regarded and valued reflects the way in which the faith community regards the child in his or her ‘world’, so to speak; how faith and culture are seen to relate to one another are a reflection of how the faith community (present and past traditions) engages with the child in his or her spiritual journey.

This view sees Christian education not simply as teaching or instruction, but rather as provisional, yet binding, processes (incorporating values, practices and resources) embodying the living faith experiences and convictions of a community within its culture. There is an interplay between the praxis of education and formation, the praxis of Christian living (discipleship), and the praxis of mission (faith engaged with context). Rather than merely transmitting Christianity, spiritual formation and education consist of participation in a faith community whose life is a dialectic work-in-progress between these dimensions.

References