ENLARGING THE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR

Dent Davis
Columbia Theological Seminary

Introduction

In the postmodern world with the compelling needs and diverse expectations of an increasingly pluralistic parish, new and competing curriculum approaches, and inconsistent program participation, the role of the religious educator is undergoing a significant change that requires a broader understanding of religious education. The concept of religious education in the church is often narrowly defined with an emphasis on Sunday school. The role of the religious educator is largely functional, focused on set tasks such as the implementation of a prescribed curriculum in a commonly accepted manner. In this traditional model, educational events are often all too predictable. As one long time church member said, reflecting on the church's Sunday School program, "It's pretty much the same. I taught years ago when my kids were little. Last year I went back. Things hadn't changed a bit." Falling numbers of participants and a general lack of enthusiasm for education in many churches have led to a type of educational anxiety about the future and a present inertia in educational practice. Education in congregations could be a vital element in the process of addressing the dramatic changes that are affecting the faithful and challenging the church's vitality and survival. Instead it plays a shrinking role in many congregations. Despite suggestions for a broader curriculum of practice in the local congregation (Harris, 1989), and an increasing cacophony of voices calling for leadership, vision, and new practices (Little, 1993b; Seymour & Miller, 1982; Seymour, 1997) present in the literature, many longtime educators would observe that their role today is not substantially different from that of years ago.

This paper describes the experience of one congregation that confronted their educational inertia by undergoing a large-scale organizational change that transformed the leadership role of the religious educator and the understanding and practice of religious education in the congregation. The purpose of this study was to understand the change process, the implications this change had on the life of the congregation as a whole, and the role of educational leadership. Research questions that guided the study are:

1. What were the key steps in the change process that led to a new church-wide educational program?
2. Who was involved in the change process and what were their roles?
3. What part did education and learning play in the change process?
4. How did the role of the religious educator impact the change process?
5. What impact did the change have on the church's educational program?

The method of the study was designed to assist in answering these questions.

Method

The case study method was most appropriate for understanding the experience of the congregation in question. Case study methodology in the United States has its roots in the work of The Chicago School (Hamel, Dufiur & Fortin, 1993). Basically a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin, 1989, p. 23). The case study provided a holistic understanding of a cultural system of interrelated activities taking place within a defined social system (Tellis, 1997). This study is a descriptive case resulting from changes in the church and accompanying educational interventions in the life of the congregation over an eighteen-month period. Limitations of the method include its specificity to a single case, which is also its strength since it allows for a more complete description, understanding, and explanation of a complex phenomenon than is afforded by other quantitative and qualitative methods (Yin, 1989).

Data sources for the study included documents that were developed as a part of the change process, open-ended interviews of participants that occurred throughout the study, reports of direct observation by individuals outside the congregation, pictures made during the change process, email communications, and the participant observations made by the researcher during the process. During data analysis these sources were constantly compared (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) and additional interviews conducted to further clarify the findings and interpretations. From this comparison, codes were developed and refined, and themes and categories identified that were important in understanding the change process (Merriam, 2001).

The heuristic dimension of the case study method involved in this study mirrored the heuristic nature of the entire project, as a congregation attempted to discern or discover an effective educational model for the future. Both involved a process of understanding, of "standing under the phenomenon until its meaning becomes clear" (Ayoto, 1990, p. 549). Underlying the congregational change process and the research process of this study are theoretical assumptions that affected the activities, observations, insights, and outcomes. These are summarized in the next section.

Theoretical Framework Underlying the Project

Understanding in both the congregational change process and this research study involved a subjective process of interpretation. Both made an ontological assumption that essential reality was not external to the individual but rather a product of experience and that "experience is an indispensable clue to understanding" (Polanyi, 1962, p. 150), an epistemological assumption that the process of knowing itself is experiential; an assumption concerning human nature that the human subject actively participates in the process of knowledge identification and that knowledge is not a pre-determined "given;" and a postmodern assumption that understanding is particular to the individual without favoring, *a priori*, a more general understanding (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Lather, 1991). This study assumes that a particular understanding is always affected by its context and is therefore susceptible to revision (Burrell & Morgan, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1983, 1989, 1990; Elias & Merriam, 1994).

Another assumption is that research itself is personal (Moustakas, 1995) with "subjective involvement in all phases of the process" (Allender, 1987). As educator involved in the

congregational change process and as researcher involved in the documentation and interpretation of the change process, my involvement affected the process. Since the experience of the participant mediates the meaning of the experience in the larger social context, a person's experience is not a solitary event. Many people participated in the project and helped in the research process as well. As Palmer (1983) wrote, understanding implies "submitting ourselves to something larger than any one of us" (p. 67). Both the change process and the study itself were highly collaborative, and involved an assumption that the Spirit of God working as a part of the experience was active as well. Both the congregational change process and the research process were high-energy experiences involving many people, many stories, and sometimes a loud cacophony of voices. Whether with regard to my voice as educator or researcher or those of many others, Polanyi's (1962) words rang true: "Into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is known, and . . . this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of this knowledge" (p. 6). Both the change process and the research study took place in the context of a living community of faith where many participated together in writing a story about how their lives were changed through a learning process.

Underlying the congregational change were two theoretical and practical frameworks that embodied these assumptions and contributed to the process and the outcomes: action research and appreciative inquiry. Action research is an intentional, systematic, and collaborative method of inquiry used to reflect and act on the real-life problems encountered in the context of experience (Stringer & Guba, 1999; Cunningham, 1993). Action research involves observation, reflection, activity, and documentation. Those directly involved in the area of study become directly involved in the inquiry and activity. The process itself is structured and often includes a facilitator who helps others get engaged and monitors the process. Because it addresses both issues of theory and practice, action research has been described as a form of praxis (Martin, 2000) designed to improve practice through involvement (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In seeking to understand experience through reflection, action research is heuristic process, involving a kind of "hermeneutics of practice" (Carson, 1992).

Closely related to action research in its appreciation for context and use of collaborative reflection, appreciative inquiry also was important in the process of congregational change. Developed through the work of David Cooperrider (1990), appreciative inquiry has been widely used in organizational studies and focuses on intentional inquiry from an appreciative perspective. Appreciative inquiry views the history and context of the organization being studied as a foundational and constructive element in its future. Through a process of constructively "valuing the best of what is, envisioning what might be, dialoguing about what should be and together enacting what will be" (Hammond, 1996, p. 24), appreciative inquiry views the organization not as a problem to be solved as much as a mystery to be embraced and understood. Through observation and listening to the stories and ideas of participants, those involved begin to glimpse the story of the organization and elements of an emerging future. Through dialogue and reflection ideas are tested and modified. Appreciative inquiry is a form of organizational discernment, and was used in this change process in hopes of better understanding the educational calling of the congregation and discerning its future.

Description of the Change Process

The Setting

The Particular Presbyterian Church[1] had a staff of fifteen, including a pastor, two associate pastors, a director of Christian education, youth minister, recreation director, business manager, three secretaries, and food service, nursery and custodial personnel. The senior pastor had served the church for over twenty years and was widely respected for his leadership and preaching skills. The site was selected because it was the church where I served as associate pastor. The church had been in existence for over 50 years. Having a higher level of education and income than the population as a whole, members are extensively involved in a wide variety of ministries both inside and outside the church. The church has a strong, positive reputation of being a congregation that supports ministries designed to help other people both locally and worldwide, including providing financial support for ten missionaries, annually building a house for Habitat for Humanity, collecting food for local charities on a monthly basis, and participating directly in the work of over a dozen local charities. The church offers two worship experiences each week with an average of over 500 in attendance.

Members of the Particular Presbyterian Church take their commitments to the church seriously. With a membership of over 1400, the Particular Presbyterian Church is one of the larger Presbyterian churches in the state. Weekly church participation of over 40% of the membership is at or above the norm for similar churches (Gallup, 1996). The individual annual average financial contribution of over $1300 in 2000 is over twice the average for members of American Protestant churches in the same year (Barna Research Group, 2000). The congregation as a whole gives almost 40% of its budget for ministries beyond the walls of the church.

In the Particular Presbyterian Church formal educational programs for all ages have been a part of the church throughout its fifty-year history. Weekly Sunday School, centerpiece of this formal educational program, includes weekly classes that take place in graded classrooms, using published curricula presented by teachers. As in many churches, classes are held for children, youth and adults, taught by lay volunteers, and focused on some aspect of Bible study (Lynn & Wright, 1971). Attendance in Sunday school might be described as "inconsistent," varying from a low of 120 to a high of 326, due in part to extensive school activities of children and youth and personal travel of the adult membership.

The congregation has also had a history of adult education. In the recent past there were five regular Sunday school classes as well as other adult learning experiences, including 8-12 additional weekly learning opportunities for adults. An average of over 250 adults participated in these learning programs. Formal educational experiences at the Particular Presbyterian Church consisted of classes, most of which might be classified as "traditional Bible studies," where the learning format involved the reading, explanation, discussion, and application of a Bible passage. A teacher led these classes and learners participated in relatively passive ways, occasionally offering a comment or asking a question. Church members also reported participation in formal learning experiences in and beyond the church, such as retreats, and classes offered at other churches and local colleges.

In addition to formal learning experiences in the Particular Presbyterian Church, members also engaged in a wide variety of informal learning activities that were individually

---

[1] A pseudonym.

focused and self-directed. The church library, including print, audio, and video resources, was frequently used by the membership. In recent years a growing number of church members also reported the value of the computer and Internet for learning about issues of faith and life.

The Particular Presbyterian Church represents an example of a strong culture with well-defined customs, language, and symbols that have been sustained over time (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). This is especially true in the educational ministry. As one member said referring to his class, "The class hasn't changed much in the ten years I have attended." The catalyst precipitating the changes reported in this study was a series of unanticipated variables from outside the cultural system, an often-reported phenomenon in the organizational change and learning literature (Watkins & Marsick, 1996; Hawkins, 1997).

The Change Process

In 1998 the church found itself in a challenging situation. The education building, which had been in use since the early 1960's, was no longer adequate for the needs of the church. With a sustained increase in the number of pre-school children attending, the rooms used for that age level were overcrowded as well as functionally dated. Educational space for the youth was also cramped and unsuitable for the types of active learning that this group enjoyed. Studies showed that renovation of the building was not feasible. Expansion of the facility was not possible because of inadequate land available around the church. A general consensus was reached to remove the current structure and construct a new building.

The decision to build a new building led to further reflection. If the church was going to construct a new facility, what should be included in that building? Extensive conversations were held as a part of small group meetings in homes. Questions related to Sunday School attendance were raised and a general lack of enthusiasm for education was noted. A kind of educational inertia was undermining the collective energy needed to move the building project for the education facility forward. Key leaders decided to see if a new program might be developed along with the new building that might involve more of the congregation and tap more of the educational energy all believed was present, if not observable. At the beginning of this process, the Director of Christian Education left to complete a seminary degree. As Associate Pastor, I volunteered to assist in the research process needed to identify different models for church educational ministries. My family history with the congregation, years of pastoral service, graduate work in education, and experience in organizational consulting led me to become involved.

Embedded in the change process were key strategies that proved significant. In the following section I will describe these examples: the Steering Committee as a structure for coordination, learning as a framework for change, learning through experience as a method for change, broad congregational involvement, and documentation of the change process.

The Steering Committee as a Structure for Coordination

A Steering Committee for the project was formed that included broad congregational representation. Membership was selected from the Christian Education Committee and almost all of the other standing committees of the church. Steering Committee members represented various age groups and included both long-time members and newcomers. The Steering Committee was made up of 28 individuals and served as the coordination, planning and reflection group throughout the eighteen-month process. The focus of the Steering Committee

was intentionally broad. As time went on the Steering Committee developed specific task force groups to address particular issues such as children's curriculum, building furnishings, special activities, and congregational involvement and publicity. The Steering Committee also tried to utilize the experience and skills of existing church committees wherever possible. Members of the Steering Committee, who also served on other regular committees, acted as "linking persons" (Likert, 1967) taking information, questions and concerns to those involved in the other groups for consideration. The goal was to involve many people in the church directly in the learning, decision-making, and planning process. The Steering Committee did this by working through the established church decision-making structure and by providing adequate information and communication to everyone. Members got involved both formally through activities and meetings, the church newsletter, reports and announcements, and informally through water cooler conversations, prayer groups, and activities like "just hanging around" as one older member said, describing her involvement. The key work of the Steering Committee was learning. Learning also became a central focus of the change process as a whole.

Learning as a Framework for Change

Learning was important in the change process because everything seemed new: new people trying to figure out how to do a new thing in a new building in a new time. Early in the process, I wrote in my journal: "The weight of change is almost overwhelming: new building with a unique, unproven design, new educational model, new technology, new people, volunteers I have never worked with before, new curriculum (actually no curriculum at all at this point). What are we going to do? Maybe this is an example of one of those situations we have to learn our way out of." Over time it became clear that the entire process was a learning process. Some elements, such as technology, were changing so fast that we could not keep up even in the design phase of the building. Learning became the central activity because there was no expert on our specific situation. Everyone had a responsibility to learn and every person's idea was a valuable contribution.

Collaboration became a key element in the learning process. People talked, reflected, and gathered data on their own. And people listened, far more than usual as more than one long-time member observed. The learning process involved trust: members had to trust their own thinking, the thinking of others, their intuition and memory, and the sometimes crazy idea that perhaps God may be at work in this process.

Individuals learned, committees learned, and the congregation learned. It was a slow and deliberate process. The Steering Committee had to learn enough to be able to identify a possible vision for education in the congregation. The committees had to learn enough to participate in the process in meaningful ways. Members of the congregation had to learn enough to make a decision to support the project and get involved. The church was in a new and unknown area and people had to learn what was necessary to make a good decision and honor what people hoped and trusted was a calling from God. Faith took on a new meaning for those involved in the project.

As a part of the action research, individuals served in a variety of capacities, shared stories and ideas, conducted research, learned how to get people involved, discovered a vision, planned for it, and learned how to implement their plan. The project built on the experiences of individuals and groups in an appreciative way and assumed that each contribution was a valuable

part of the learning process. Learning by doing, an active process of reflection, inquiry, and activity or praxis (Groome, 1980), was the heart of the project.

Learning took many forms. Some learning was formal, involving presentations to large congregational groups with discussion and handouts. Some was informal. For example, church participants talked with their friends and families about the educational activities and facilities at other churches. Some members used the Internet to find out what other churches were doing. Church staff had ideas. Using various methods, the Steering Committee made formal inquiry about educational models used in other congregations by contacting those that had innovative programs. Informal discussions occurred among various groups in the church. Members recalled educational experiences they had as children and adults that they remembered as especially meaningful such as stories of Bible School, Christmas dramas, summer camp experiences, and Sunday School. As information and ideas about educational program possibilities were identified, the Steering Committee and church staff disseminated them through the church newsletter and informal presentations. Groups visited several churches with innovative educational programs over a four-month period. As a part of each visit the groups reported to the Steering Committee, congregation and committee leadership. Much informal discussion ensued, and feedback about the discussion was brought to the Steering Committee. Gradually a vision for education emerged from the process itself.

After a six-month reflection process a decision was made formally through the church structure and informally through many conversations to develop an educational model that would be similar to the Workshop Rotation Model, an activity-based learning model using multiple intelligence strategies focused on specific Bible stories (MacQueen, 1997; Armstrong-Hansche & MacQueen, 2000). The Rotation model would be adapted to the uniqueness of the church's situation and applied throughout the church's educational program in age-appropriate ways. People were drawn to the experiential basis of the Rotation Model, even as they became aware of the importance of experiential learning in their own lives and the church's life. As one man observed, "I realized that what really mattered to me about my faith were a handful of experiences that changed my life."

Learning through Experience as a Method for Change

Learning through experience emerged as an important theme in the research as well as the stories members told of their meaningful learning experiences. Activity-based learning was a pivotal element in the emerging educational model because it had become an important part of the change process itself. The Steering Committee began to ask, if key educational memories that church members had of positive learning experiences were associated with activities, they must be important in the learning process. If we were trying to develop an educational model that incorporates activity-based learning, why not embed the development and implementation process itself in activity-based learning experiences for the entire congregation? The Steering Committee wanted the congregation to experience activity-based learning as a part of learning about it.

The goal was to help as many church participants become involved as possible, support them in learning what they needed to learn to participate and contribute, help them remember what they learned, support their giving ongoing feedback on their learning, and encouraging them to teach others. All ages were included in the development and implementation process since all ages were affected, and as one member of the Steering Committee said, "Young

children are really the experts in this stuff anyway. They do it everyday." The assumption behind the development and implementation of the model was that people would learn about the model by experiencing it and that the congregation would learn how to adapt the model for the church culture by reflecting on those experiences. This was an essential part of the change process and was important in helping to ensure that it was viewed as a congregation-wide activity and not just the activity of a few committee members.

The planning process used to adapt the Rotation Model for the Particular Presbyterian Church included a series of learning activities followed by reflection and feedback. Activities took place at the committee or small group level as well as the congregational level. The goal was to learn what form the church's educational program should take by embedding the planning in an experiential learning process involving an ever-increasing number of congregational participants. For example, rather than have a meeting to talk about activity-based learning, a committee might engage in an activity that was an example of what they wanted to talk about. Action came first, followed by reflection on what were learned, and then possible applications for the church's educational ministry.

The committee believed that the quality and effectiveness of the model, as well as the commitment of the congregation, was directly related to the overall level of learning of those involved in the congregation. Goals for the learning process included structuring it so that a large number of members and participants in the congregation might:

- Gain adequate knowledge of the emerging model during the development and implementation process so they could be supportive and give feedback,
- Participate in the development process,
- Experience a sense of interpersonal bonding with other congregational participants through their participation,
- Have opportunity to connect "the unknown," the new and emerging model for education, to "the known," their experiences and memories of church-related learning experiences,
- Be able to learn and participate in ways that allowed them to access their preferred learning styles, and
- Have multiple highly visible, even repetitious, opportunities for involvement, learning, and feedback over time.

These goals were addressed through a variety of structured learning experiences. The following three examples are illustrative.

After a presentation on the emerging model by members of the Steering Committee, church members were asked to suggest specific Bible stories for inclusion in the new curriculum by completing a short survey form. The form was also disseminated to the congregation through the existing Sunday School classes as well as the church newsletter. The Curriculum Committee, a sub-committee of the Steering Committee, compiled the list and published it to the congregation asking for their feedback. The committee later held "hearings," informal opportunities for members to give input on the scope and sequence as well as design and development of the curriculum. Church members appreciated the opportunity for involvement. One said, "I felt like my opinion really mattered, and that doesn't happen too often."

Don Griggs, a noted educator knowledgeable on the Rotation Model, and an "outsider," was invited to conduct a weekend workshop for the church that provided opportunity for participants to learn about the model and discuss its strengths and weaknesses. During his visit, Don described his own experience in Christian education, provided information on how other

churches effectively structured their educational programs, listened and answered questions. He also led several short activity-based learning experiences focused on stories from the Bible that illustrated the type of learning that was being discussed. Members of the congregation appreciated the voice of a knowledgeable outsider and the opportunity to actually engage in this new type of learning.

Toward the end of the development process for the educational model, a large scale, church-wide demonstration of the emerging model was held on a Sunday morning. This demonstration took the place of the regular Sunday morning program, and involved the entire congregation and campus. Called "The Big Picnic," the event focused on the Biblical story of the feeding of the Five Thousand (Luke 9:10-17). It included worship, a multigenerational rotational learning experience where the congregation was divided into groups and shepherded through two of six activity-based learning centers. These were set up throughout the church campus, and culminated in a congregational picnic and opportunities for discussion with the teachers and facilitators. Following the event, which generated a huge amount of energy and support for the development and implementation process for the new educational program, one elderly member said to a member of the Steering Committee, "Thank you, thank you, thank you. Now I understand what all this stuff is about. This is the best day we've had around her in a long time. I can't wait 'til this gets going. If I can help, let me know. This is great."

Although most of the experiences reported were positive, there were some members who did not find these experiences helpful. One long time member commenting on "The Big Picnic" said "This stuff is okay for kids, but I think it's a waste of time." Others were impatient with the process. One said, "Why don't you just go ahead and decide instead of talking this stuff to death." Another responded to an invitation to get involved by saying: "I don't have time to do Sunday School. I never did like it very much and my opinion hasn't changed much recently either." Over time however the involvement of more people, the enthusiastic support of the Senior Pastor and staff, and the positive experiences of many generated a critical mass of involvement that ensured the success of the project.

Broad Congregational Involvement Throughout the Change Process

The development and implementation process also included numerous well-publicized opportunities for individuals to contribute their expertise and get involved in specific aspects of the project. For example, the Steering Committee asked for volunteers to work with the various activity-based learning centers. A local secondary school teacher volunteered to work with puppets, because, as he said, "It's something I've always wanted to do." He in turn asked for volunteers to work with him and nine responded. Together they read about puppets, visited other churches and attended workshops, learning how to develop a puppet center for the church. Others got involved in making puppets and sets, and still others in learning how to manipulate the puppets. One volunteer led to the involvement of over twenty other members in the work of this center. This process was repeated many times as centers were also developed in the areas of art, music, media, computer, storytelling, drama, games and food. Members were encouraged to volunteer their experience and knowledge in areas that were familiar to them. Because the project was complex and the outcomes were not predetermined, there were numerous opportunities for involvement. A member of the congregation who volunteered to lead the development of the media for the new building said, "This is the first thing that's happened around here in a long time that I felt like I knew something about."

One of the highlights of the learning process mentioned by many who were involved happened at "The Big Picnic." At that event participants were asked to decorate a ceramic tile with symbols and words highlighting their view of the importance of that event for the congregation. Over three hundred tiles were created by young and old. Later they were fired and incorporated into a permanent wall display in the new building. One member commenting on the collage of symbols said: "This is like the church, all different… people sharing their faith and their lives. Put it all together and it's beautiful, and symbolic of how this whole thing has gone."

The church staff, including me as religious educator, played an important role in the change process. The role was one of shared leadership where each individual used his or her gifts to support the process. The leadership role included several key elements. Learning was foundational. As one staff member said, "This is all new stuff to me, back to school in a big way." In this change process, leadership was not a function of expertise, but learning. Leadership facilitated congregational involvement. Facilitation involved a balance between advocating or voicing a perspective, and listening or inquiring of others. One participant said: "I don't just want someone asking me what I think, especially when it's clear they know a lot more than I do. I want to know where they stand first. But I also really appreciate being asked what I think." Facilitation also involved careful listening, documentation, and sometimes interpretation of what had been said. Another distinctive element of leadership in this project involved modeling the perspective of a "non-anxious presence," a person who can tolerate the anxiety, uncertainty and at times the chaos that accompanies a change process. The practice of non-anxious listening encouraged reflection rather than reaction, and gave participants space to get involved. Leadership was also a process of modeling, as the church staff actively supported the change process and modeled a stance of collaboration and trust for each other and the process.

Throughout the two-year process, there was a steadily increasing sense of congregational ownership of the model and awareness of the importance of learning. Learning outcomes resulted in tangible products. A new building was designed, built and furnished. Learning centers were established, resourced and staffed with talented volunteers, a curriculum was written, and the logistics necessary to support the educational program were organized—all with broad congregational involvement and considerable spirit. Because of the time and numbers of people involved, documentation of the process was critical.

Documentation of the Change Process

Learning from the project was documented through photographs, written notes that were distributed to participants, church newsletter articles, and short informational talks given by Steering Committee members to church groups. Email was also extensively used to communicate important information and solicit feedback. The documentation process helped to assure that critical insights and information were not misplaced and could be remembered as time went on. Documentation and dissemination of the information also helped ensure widespread feedback from members and participants in the church and led to a greater sense of congregational involvement.

Practical and Theological Implications of This Case

Lessons that were learned from this project assisted the Particular Presbyterian Church and hold promise for the wider church. These lessons clustered into five broad thematic

categories: leadership, learning, change, theological implications, and wider applications. In the sections that follow each area will be addressed.

Leadership

Findings from this study led to important clarifications in the role of educational leadership and suggest important insights for the areas of educational vision, the role of the religious educator, and the role of the lay leadership. Effective leadership is an active process of advocacy and inquiry exercised in a participatory manner in the context of real life issues that build vision, develop skill, and lead to changes in belief, attitudes and behavior for all involved.

Educational Vision

Vision has long been recognized as an important part of leadership. In the secular world visional leadership is often associated with the charismatic, hard working, strong willed and tough minded individual who rides into town as John Wayne did in the movies, taking charge, and saving the day. In the church these individuals are often described as powerful, eloquent, and spirit-filled. This study suggests that this type of visional leadership has significant limitations. In this project the congregation did not start with a vision and the vision did not belong to any one person or group. The vision was a collaborative effort that emerged through the experience of hundreds of people over an eighteen-month period. At the conclusion of the project the vision was widely affirmed, although articulated in slightly different ways. Effective educational visions emerge from a collaborative process over time and do not belong to a single leader or small group of participants (Fullan, 1993).

Role of the educator

One of the important differences between these findings and much of the literature on organizational learning concerns the nature of leadership. In the world of organization development (Mirvis, 1988; 1999), as well as congregational change (Rendle, 1998), the emphasis is often on the leader. Even where collaborative efforts are recommended, the role of the leader is placed in the foreground. In addition, authors often recommend the value of leadership from outside the culture of the organization (Burke, 1994).

The role of the educator in this change process was to help articulate the educational vision as it emerged, facilitate the involvement of people in the process, and connect the emerging vision to traditions of faith. This role was much broader than that usually attributed to the religious educator in the congregation. Although I had experience in organization development that helped me focus on the bigger picture, it was the engagement of a critical mass of church members that led to an awareness of the expanded role of leadership described in this paper. In this project, I was not the expert, even though I brought important skills and experience to the project. In fact many leaders emerged during the project.

Facilitation was a key aspect of educational leadership in this project. Long recognized as an important skill by educators in congregational settings, facilitation involved a balance between advocacy and inquiry (Argyris & Schon, 1992), a process of voicing ideas, opinions and interpretations, and simultaneously inviting the ideas of others. As one congregational participant said, "It's like opening a window and saying something to someone outside, and then holding the window open long enough for somebody else to get in their two cents worth."

Facilitation also involved careful listening, documentation, and sometimes interpretation of what had been said. Another distinctive element of facilitation involved modeling the perspective of a "non-anxious presence," one or more people who can serve as a kind of psychic container for the anxiety, uncertainty and at times the chaos that accompanies a change process. The practice of non-anxious listening encouraged reflection and learning, rather than reaction. Facilitation in this project was collaborative. Sharing facilitation is an important aspect of the role of the religious educator in today's changing environment.

Role of Lay Leadership

The active leadership of the church's lay members was foundational to the success of the change process. Locating the project in the context of the congregation's experience helped to minimize the use of theological jargon, which has a way of disenfranchising lay participation. Many lay leaders view theological discourse as a barrier to communication. Referring to a theological discussion between pastors, for example, one lay leader said, "I don't speak the language." The structure of the change process and its emphasis on activity-based learning was viewed as empowering by the lay leaders involved. One man said: "I can do this. I know something about this stuff. I feel like I can contribute." People perceived that they had a variety of ways to become involved.

Genuine empowerment was more than involvement. Many churches practice involvement by seeking input, but the power to form or fashion the outcome is reserved for a select few. In this project the system pushed the decision making process far beyond the Steering Committee and that led to a significant sense of engagement by the lay leaders involved. Participants became personally connected with the learning process because they had a stake in the decision and the outcome. At the same time, the systemic nature of the change process also provided appropriate boundaries and structures for engagement, so no one person or group assumed a voice that was inappropriately large.

Learning

This case describes the change process of the Particular Presbyterian Church. Learning was at the heart of that process. Learning occurred at all levels of the congregation: individually, in groups and committees, and at the organizational level. As a whole the process described in this case might be termed an example of strategic level learning, since it affected the entire organization. In the wider field of adult education this process would be identified as a form of program planning (Caffarella, 2002), and viewed as an example of organization development in the organizational change literature (Mirvis, 1988, 1989). Findings from this study underscore several important elements of strategic learning including: education as discovery, the importance of learning, and learning by experience. In the sections that follow each will be described and important implications noted.

Education as Discovery

The root meaning of education is from the Latin, *educare,* to lead out, or discover. This understanding of education assumes that the answer is unknown, but in a sense already resides in the activities, relationships and history of the congregation, its members and groups. This implies an inductive process of learning-- a heuristic approach. Findings from this study suggest that such an approach to learning can be highly successful in congregational settings. By emphasizing

the importance of intentional learning in the context of congregational planning and decision-making, raising awareness of that importance, and structuring the learning process so it is embedded in the activities and interactions of the people over time, new and different insights appeared. When the outcome is unknown and must be discovered, a highly structured process provides the "space" necessary for a large number of individuals to become engaged, for them to listen and learn on an organizational level, and time for new insights to become clear.

Learning central to process

At the beginning of the change process, the goals were not clear and the answers were not known. Because of this, learning was critical and opportunities to learn as individuals, groups, classes, committees, and as a congregation were vitally important to success. Since the project involved facility changes that were new, it was important to identify opportunities for local residents in the community around the church to learn about the changes. In order to include more people in the learning process, redundant learning opportunities were provided to accommodate people's schedules and interests. Vital to the success of the project was a communication system that linked the various individuals, groups and activities involved in the change effort. And because people prefer to learn in different ways (Gardner, 1993; Meier, 2000), multiple types of learning experiences were provided, from discussion groups to puppet shows and demonstrations.

Learning through experience

Adult educators have long affirmed, "adults learn as a part of their lives" (Merriam, 2001a, p. 3). That was certainly true for participants in this project. Learning in this study involved "attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one's behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills" (Merriam & Clark, 1993, p.131).

Activity-based learning, a form of learning through experience, provided a way for participants to personally experience new ideas and reflect on them. Our experience was that new cognitive information by itself generates resistance while people struggle to figure out the meaning and implications of the information and imagine what it might look like in experience. In contrast, activity-based learning provided a place for participants to work through their reflections actively, emotionally, spiritually as well as cognitively, and where appropriate, in a community. In the experience of the Particular Presbyterian Church, learning led to change individually, programmatically, and organizationally.

Change

Study findings suggest that both leadership and learning impacted the process of organizational change in the congregation. In many organizational change efforts, goals are at least partially specified and an intentional process developed and implemented leading to a desired outcome (Burke, 1994). In this study the outcomes were not pre-determined and the process was heuristic. Learning was the focus. Change was a by-product of learning. Leadership was collaborative, focused on learning, and situated within the culture of the organization itself (Wilson, 1993). Because learning was at the heart of the organizational change process, the congregation functioned in similar ways to a learning organization.

Learning Organization

In recent years the concept of the learning organization was made popular through the work of Senge (1990). The learning organization is an organization that continually expands its ability to create desired results, uses learning as an intentional, strategic tool for organizational and individual advancement, and facilitates learning for all its members (Pedler, Burgoyne & Burdell, 1991; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Findings from this study indicated a similar process. Learning took place at the individual, group, and organizational levels, and that learning was systematic, collaborative and documented-- all elements commonly described as part of the phenomenon of the learning organization (Watkins & Marsick, 1993).

Although similar to the concept of the learning organization described in the literature, this case suggests two distinguishing characteristics. Many cases in the literature describe a change model that is imported from outside the organization and implemented within. The change process in the Particular Presbyterian Church was embedded in the congregation. The scope of learning was also greater than that reported in the organization change literature since it included the spiritual dimension, an element prominent in the findings from this study. Study participants viewed learning as a spiritual discernment process that not only occurred on an individual level in ways similar to those described by Hawkins (1997), but also a group and organizational level. The spiritual dimension of organizational learning found in this study represents an additional dimension in the concept of the learning organization not previously identified.

Change occurred in the Particular Presbyterian Church, individuals changed. Groups changed. The church changed. There were changes in attitude, changes in involvement, changes in program, curriculum, facility, and relationships with people in the church's neighborhood. In this study learning was inseparably associated with change.

Theological Implications

Study findings underscore a widely held belief by the congregation that God was a part of the church's change process. Viewed through the lens of spiritual formation, this approach makes an assumption that God's spirit is already at work in the individuals, groups and the congregation as a whole, through the exercise of many individual gifts (I Corinthians 12), calling the community to a new way of being. Learning was in this sense a discernment process.

This study describes what might be termed contextual theology at work (Bevans, 1992). The locus of God's speech was contextual, involving present day experience, personal experiences and memories that form the church as a community of faith. The learning process was the context for a deepening of the faith experience for many in the congregation. Faith literally took shape in relationships, conversations, planning, and construction. The experience of those involved in this change process suggests that in a real sense, God was present in the details, and that the most important part of the discernment process involved listening and learning.

A situated, contextual model of discernment assumes that God's spirit is present in the community of faith and God's calling is woven into the fabric of its life. Unlike the story of Moses on Mount Horeb, this is not the story of a single leader or small group going to the mountain or to the texts of scripture and bringing forth the authoritative word, map or plan to the people gathered below. Rather this experience is about small groups of people vitally interested in their church, prayerfully reflecting on their experience, and together making a map uniquely

suited to their situation by continually widening the circle of dialogue, documenting their efforts, and learning from their experience.

This study is an example of Harris' (1989) notion that in Christian education people are fashioned through a contextual, collaborative learning experience involving God's Spirit. A form of Christian praxis (Groome, 1980), the learning and change process experienced by the Particular Presbyterian Church involved Groome's (1980) five movements: naming present reality, critical reflection, interaction with the traditions of the Christian story, dialog between the stories of tradition and present experience, and a concrete faith response. The experience described in this study underscored the importance of theological truth viewed more subjectively from the perspective of disclosure or discernment, in contrast to more objective views of truth focused on correspondence or control. This study describes an experience of God's immanence and suggests a democratic, dialogical view of discernment. The outcomes resulting from the study, the renewed spiritual energy and faith reported by participants, and the profound sense of educational vision that resulted suggest the power of this theological vision in the formation of the community of faith.

Wider applications of this case study

In many ways the situation of the Particular Presbyterian Church was unique. Serving as associate pastor with a family history in the congregation and primary responsibility for the project, a strong relationship with the senior pastor, and many years of experience in education as a pastor, as well as formal training in adult education and extensive consulting experience, was to use the words of one church member "highly unusual." The church was also in a unique position of needing to change its building, program model and staff all at the same time. The size of the church ensured adequate human and financial resources, and also allowed for a level of communication impossible in larger congregations. The emergence of the Internet as a form of communication and its rapid adoption by a large number of church members also allowed for more extensive involvement of congregation in research and better communication than what was traditionally possible. How applicable are these findings to other church situations?

Several leaders discussed this question at the end of the project. One woman's answer resonated with many when she said: "If you stop to think about it, every church is unique. The challenge is to figure out what to do with that uniqueness. That's what we had to do. And what matters here is not the model or the result, but the process we went through. That's what's important." Even in its uniqueness, this story holds important lessons applicable in a wide range of congregational settings. The importance and applicability of this case study for other situations has to do with the scope of the change process.

One of the reasons for the success of this effort was a clear sense of need for change. Another was the linkage perceived by the congregation between the multiple, different tasks involved in the project. For example, the development of the educational program model, curriculum, teacher training, the new building and its furnishings provided many different opportunities for people to become engaged in the process and outcomes of the project. Most educational change efforts are too narrow in focus to generate a critical mass of engaged involvement by a broad cross section of congregational leadership. In this project the value of the emerging educational model, facility and program were apparent to even to the casual membership of the church. Trust, learning, and courage often transferred from "the known" to the "unknown" areas of the project. People who had experienced one facet of the program often

could trust other less known aspects because of the elements they knew and were comfortable with. For example, when the missions committee realized the value of the technological elements of the project for their goal of increasing congregational involvement in missions, they enthusiastically supported the development of the technology.

Many lessons were learned through the experience described in this study. Several key lessons included:

- In situations of significant congregational transition learning is an effective change strategy,
- Facilitation is a critical leadership skill,
- Participatory leadership is empowering and leads to innovative ideas and sometimes startling results,
- Authentic engagement of congregational participants leads to understanding, support, empowerment and commitment,
- Planning activity-based experiential learning activities invites active participation by a broad spectrum of church members,
- Heuristic learning is a process with evangelical dimensions that can lead to a deeper faith experience for many participants,
- Strategic approaches to Christian Education can strengthen the church as a learning organization and as a community of faith, and
- God's presence in the details of a congregation's life is often apparent to those who are willing to learn and listen. As Jesus said, "Pay attention" (Mark 13:18); "Anyone who has ears for listening should listen" (Mark 4:23, New Jerusalem Bible).

Conclusion

In the 1990 report of the Search Institute's national study of Christian Education (Benson & Eklin, 1990), a suggestion was made that effective education in the future depends on making significant and thoroughgoing changes in the educational structure, format and assumptions. Most efforts involve "tinkering" with the educational system, and are often ineffective (p. 67). The study cites the importance of restructure and underscores the complexities and challenges involved. This study represents an example of one congregation's effort to restructure its educational system.

In this project, the entire parish became the classroom, the religious educator the facilitator of individual, group, and organizational learning, and the congregation a type of learning organization. Results from this action research project suggest that a more comprehensive role for the religious educator is to be an agent of collaborative change and a spiritual guide for systemic learning in collaboration with other church staff and lay leaders.

One of the problems in many church settings is that the professional educator often operates in a type of silo that narrowly focuses on children's ministry, the maintenance of the Sunday School program, curriculum selection, teacher training, and crisis management. These activities significantly confine the vision of the educator to these types of tasks thereby limiting the congregational vision for education. In this project the experience of the congregation from the beginning of the change process to the implementation of the new educational program served as the curriculum for learning. Although similar to Harris' (1989) notion of curriculum

involving community, prayer, teaching, proclamation and service, this project is focused on an even larger palate including facility design, organization development, and community involvement.

The ability to operate at a strategic level in Christian education, as well as a technical, tactical level has been described by Senge (1990) as "systems thinking," or the "discipline for seeing wholes… sensitivity for the subtle interconnectedness that gives living systems their unique character" (pp 68-69). Similar to Steinke's (1993) "looking beyond the trees to see the forest" (p. 14), and what Little (1993a) terms a "spiderweb" of learning, the ability to make connections between diverse areas of the congregation's life is a critical component of the role of the religious educator in a changing educational environment.

Bruffee (1993) uses the term "authority of knowledge" (p. 49) to describe the fact that a person's role is related to what they know. If Christian educators are not trained in the understanding and practice of the larger issues of strategic learning such as systems thinking, organization development, adult learning, and research, they will have a very limited voice – and role - in the congregation's life. Such training would not make the educator the expert, but would allow her or him to participate in the process. If the scope of the vision of an educator is limited to the classroom, and primarily a children's classroom, they simply will not see the bigger picture, and will not be able to contribute in meaningful ways to the process of figuring out how to discover an educational vision appropriate for a complex, rapidly changing world. Findings from this project suggest that the scope of the educator's education and training needs to be enlarged. Simply put, in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century, the classroom needs to be enlarged.

Change is dramatically affecting the lives of church participants and the educational programs of many churches today. The lifestyles of members, increased use of technology, options for curriculum and resources, and competition from the popular media culture are affecting the lives of many. With today's rapid changes, it is impossible for any one church, pastor or educator to keep up. There are no experts. There are only learners. Because of the rapidity and extent of the changes, it is impossible for an individual to do this learning effectively alone. Collaborative learning becomes a necessity, not a luxury. Educational program development in a complex, uncertain and rapidly changing environment is a venture into the unknown. In a profound sense, engaging in the development of an educational ministry at the beginning of the 21st Century is an act of faith. It is also a significant educational calling.

References

Allender, J. S. (1987). The evolution of research methods for the study of human experience. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 27,* 458–484.

Argyris, C. & Schon, D. A. (1992). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Armstrong-Hansche, M. & MacQueen, N. (2000). *Workshop rotation: A new model for Sunday school*. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press.

Aronowitz, S., & Giroux, H. A. (1991). *Postmodern education*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ayoto, J. (1990). *Dictionary of word origins*. New York: Arcade Publishing.

Barna Research Group. (2000, April 5). Evangelicals are the most generous givers. *The Barna Update.* (see also <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageAboutBarna.asp>)

Benson, P. L. & Eklin, C. H. (1990). *Effective Christian education: A national study of Protestant congregations.* Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

Bevans, S. B. (1992). *Models of contextual theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Boud, D. J., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (1985). Promoting reflection in learning: A model. In D. J. Boud & D. Walker (Eds.), *Reflection: Turning experience into learning* (pp. 18–40). London: Kegan Page.

Bruffee, K. A. (1993). *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Burke, W. W. (1994). *Organization development: A process of learning and changing*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Co.

Burrell, G., &. Morgan G. (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis*. London: Heinmann.

Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. London: Falmer.

Carson, T. R. (1992). Remembering forward: Reflections on educating for peace. In W. Pinar & W. Reynolds (Eds.), *Understanding curriculum as phenomenological and deconstructed text*, 102-115. New York: Teachers College Press.

Casey, E. S. (1991). *Spirit and soul: Essays in philosophical psychology*. Dallas, TX: Spring Publications.

Cranton, P. (1994). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cunningham, J. B. (1993). *Action research and organizational development*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Deal, T. E., & Kennedy, A. A. (1982). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Dixon, N. (1992). Organizational learning: A review of the literature with implications for HRD professionals. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 3* (1), 29-49.

Dodgson, M. (1993). Organizational learning: A review of some literatures. *Organization Studies, 14* (3), 375-391.

Elias, J. L., & Merriam, S. (1994). *Philosophical foundations of adult education* (2nd ed.). Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press, Taylor and Francis Inc.

Gallup, G. H. (1996). *Religion in America: 1996 report.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religion Research Center.

Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences: The theory in practice*. New York: Basic Books, HarperCollins.

Glasser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldine.

Groome, T. H. (1980). *Christian religious education: Sharing our story and vision*. New York: Harper and Row.

Hamel, J., Dufiur, S. & Fortin, D. (1993). *Case study methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Harris, M. (1989). *Fashion me a people*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Hawkins, T. R. (1997). *The learning congregation: A new vision of leadership.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Jarvis, P. (1992). *Paradoxes of learning: On becoming an individual in society.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern.* London: Routledge.

Likert, R. (1967). *The Human Organization: Its Management and Value.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Little, S. (1993a). Rethinking adult education. In D. S. Schuller (Ed.), *Rethinking Christian education: Explorations in theory and practice.* St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.

Little, S. (1993b). The 'clue' to religious education. *Union Seminary review, 47,* 20.

MacQueen, N. (1997). While we're on the subject of change— How about a new model for Sunday School? *Presbyterian Outlook* (September, 1997). Available at: http://www.rotation.org/outlook.htm

Martin, B. (2000). Living education: Action research as a practical approach to congregational education. *Religious Education, 95* (2), Spring 2000, 152-166.

Meier, D. (2000). *The accelerated learning handbook*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Merriam, S. B. (2001a). Andragogy and self directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *The new update on adult learning theory*. S. Imel (Series Ed.) New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 89, Spring 2001, pp. 3-15. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Merriam, S. B., & Clark, M. C. (1993). Learning from life experience: What makes it significant? *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 12,* 129–138.

Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Mirvis, P. (1988). Organization development: Part I–An evolutionary perspective. In R. W. Woodman & W. A. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development: Vol. 2* (pp. 1–57). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Mirvis, P. (1989). Organization development: Part II–A revolutionary perspective. In R. W. Woodman & W. A. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development: Vol. 4* (pp. 1–84). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Moustakas, C. (1995). *Being-in, being-for, being-with.* London: Jason Aronson.

Palmer, P. J. (1983). *To know as we are known: A spirituality of education*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J. & Boydell, T. (1991). *The learning company: A strategy for sustainable development*. London: McGraw Hill.

Peters, T., & Waterman, R. H. (1982). *In search of excellence*. New York: Harper & Row.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1983). *Methodology for the human sciences: Systems of inquiry*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology*. New York: Plenum.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1990). Psychology after philosophy. In J. Faulconer & R. Williams (Eds.), *Reconsidering psychology: Perspectives from continental philosophy* (pp. 92–115). Pittsburgh, PA: DuQuesne University Press.

Rendle, G. R. (1998). *Leading change in the congregation*. Washington, D. C.: The Alban Institute.

Schein, E. (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership* (2nd edition). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Doubleday.

Seymour, J. (Ed.). (1997). *Mapping Christian education: Approaches to congregational learning*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Seymour, J. & Miller, D. E. (Eds.). (1982). *Contemporary approaches to Christian education*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Steinke, P. L. (1993). *How your church family works*. Washington, D. C.: The Alban Institute.

Stringer, E. T. & Guba, E. G. (1999). *Action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tellis, W. (1997, July). Introduction to case study. The Qualitative Report, 3 (2), 1-12. Available: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-2/tellis1.html

Watkins, K. E. & Marsick, V. J. (1993). *Sculpting the learning organization: Lessons in the art and science of systemic change*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Watkins, K. E. & Marsick, V. J. (1996). What have we learned. In K. E. Watkins & V. J. Marsick (Eds.), *In action: Creating the learning organization* (Vol. 1), 265-284. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development.

Wilson, A. L. (1993). The promise of situated cognition. Chapter 7 in S. B. Merriam, (Ed.), *An update on adult learning theory*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Number 57, R. G. Brockett, (Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Yin, R. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Rev. ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.