

The Religious Educator: A Motivation (or Barrier) to Participation in Church-Based Education

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ABSTRACT

A major concern among religious institutions is participation in educational activities. While some classes seem to flourish others succumb to a quick death. Although within the field of adult education there are many theories on adults' motivations and barriers to participating in adult education in general, few closely examine the same issues within religious institutions. A closer examination reveals even fewer discussions on the role the educator plays in adults' participation. Thus a myopic view of adult education participation exists. This paper examines the religious educator's role in adult learners' participation in educational activities in church-based education.

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier study, Isaac (1999) and Isaac, Guy and Valentine (2001) examined motivations of adult learners in church-based education. In a subsequent study, Isaac and Rowland (in review) explored barriers to participation within the same context. This paper represents a re-analysis of those data with a particular focus on the religious educator as a motivation or barrier to participation.

Religious institutions have been successful in providing adult education to learners who might not otherwise participate in educational activities. Synagogues, temples, and churches, have a long historical, educational history. Part of the church's educational role is as an agent of transformation (Beatty and Robbins 1990). This is inclusive of individuals, groups, and society. As Beatty and Hayes further point out, "Virtually every local religious institution offers some form of adult education programming" (p. 401). In order to meet its mandate, the church had to provide a variety of educational opportunities to adult learners. As Sisemore (1970) states, "The education of adults was carried out vigorously by the early church. In fact, the education of adults, along with the attendant activities growing out of education, largely constituted the church's program" (9).

Since many churches were concerned about the welfare of human beings and found their educational programs expanding, it was imperative to coordinate its educational activities. Thus, a Director of Religious Education (DRE) or Director of Christian Education was employed (sometimes voluntarily) to oversee educational programming. Part of the DRE's duties was to oversee the instructors, teachers, or educators who facilitated classes. These religious educators became an extension of the religious institutions they represented. While there are many factors that contribute to the success or failure of a church-based educational program, the religious or Christian educator is one of them. Religious educators can serve as a motivation for adults' participation in educational activities within the church. On the other hand, they can also serve as barriers to learning. Nonetheless, it is imperative to understand the reasons adults participate in adult education. Fortosis (1992) points out, "if the reasons for adult

educational participation are understood, classes can be designed which will legitimately motivate more widespread and consistent involvement” (p. 91).

This paper examines what impact the religious educator can have on adults’ learning and participation in adult education within religious institutions, more specifically, the Christian church. We first begin our discussion with an examination of motivations and barriers to adult education. We then turn our attention to aspects of the religious educator.

ADULT EDUCATION MOTIVATIONS

Adults participate in educational activities for a number of reasons. Transitions can influence an adult’s decision to participate. Transitions take place throughout our lives. A single woman becomes a wife and mother. A janitor is given the opportunity to change careers. Adult children become caretakers for an ailing parent. A married woman who never worked outside the home finds herself a widow with no employable skills. Hence, changes related to work or family situations can be the catalyst for adult learning. Not surprising, learners have cited past, present, or future changes in their lives as reasons for participation. In fact, career transitions have been found to be the main reason for deciding to learn (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980). Other transitions included changes in leisure and health. A man, after working for 35 years, retires. Now that he has leisure time, he can learn how to play golf or tennis. There has been a proliferation in the number of adults concerned about their health. Health-related problems have served as an impetus for this upsurge. Thus, more colleges and universities are offering health-related classes. Regardless of the impetus, in order for adults to make transitions successfully, they have to engage in learning.

Houle (1988) was the first to examine individuals’ orientations toward learning. He described three groups of learners. They were goal, activity, or learning-oriented. Members of the goal-oriented group saw education as an avenue for accomplishing a specific goal or objective. For instance, a woman may want to learn how to extend the life of her car, so she enrolls in a car maintenance class. Activity-oriented learners took part in learning “because they find in the circumstances of the learning a meaning which has no necessary connection . . . with the content or the announced purposes of the activity” (p 15). To illustrate, a woman may take a course in crocheting, but for all intended purposes, she is really interested in meeting other people. So, the course provides an means for her to socialize and meet other people. Finally, those who were learning-oriented sought knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Individuals in this group enjoyed learning and took advantage of such opportunities.

Johnstone and Rivera’s (1965) landmark study found that respondents reported participating in adult education to become better informed. Job-related reasons such as preparing for a new job or occupation and learning more about their present job were another motivator. They concluded that “vocational goals most frequently direct adults into continuing education, . . . it appears that slightly more adults take courses for job preparation than for job advancement” (p 144). Even people who studied academic subjects did so for general information, job advancement, or job preparation purposes.

Some studies have used derived factor solutions or structures to explain motivations of adult learners. Boshier (1971), for example, using Houle’s typology developed the Education Participation Scale (EPS). In doing so, he identified 14

different categories of motivations. They were social welfare, social contact, inner-directed professional advancement, intellectual recreation, other-directed professional advancement, social conformity, education preparedness, cognitive interest, education compensation, social sharing, television abhorrence, social improvement/escape, interpersonal facilitation, and education supplementation. Eventually the EPS was revised and, today, commonly contains five or six factors. External expectations describe adults who participate to acquiesce to the wishes of others or participate because it is mandated. Community service motivations are associated with helping humankind or the community. Some adults are motivated by social contact. They are desirous of making friends or fulfilling personal needs. Adults wanting to be accepted or escape their routines are motivated to participate by social stimulation. And, as previous studies suggested, adults participate for job improvement related reasons such as professional advancement. Finally, adults motivated to participate in adult education for cognitive interest pursue knowledge for its own sake. Since his introduction of the EPS in 1971, Boshier (1991) has developed an alternative form of the EPS that consists of seven factors—communication improvement, social contact, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, social stimulation, and cognitive interests. Other studies have found similar results based on Boshier's original EPS.

Using the EPS as a foundation, Fujita-Starck (1996) found that in addition to professional advancement, social contact, and cognitive reasons, adults were motivated by other factors. Some adults participated to enhance their written or verbal communication skills or to improve their language skills. Yet others participated because they had missed the opportunity to get an education or further their education. Other adults participated for family reasons such as being able to talk to their children or share a common interest with a family member.

Morstain and Smart (1977) also found that adults were motivated by six factors—social relationships, external expectations, social welfare, professional advancement, escape/stimulation and cognitive. Adults who participated for social relationships did so in order to make new friends and gain insight into their personal problems. External expectations described those adults who complied with the wishes or directives of someone else with authority. For example, if a person teaches a particular course at his or her church, he or she may be required to attend special classes designed for instructors. Adults who were motivated in preparation to serve others or their community participated for social welfare reasons. Professional advancement delineated adults seeking greater competence and higher status in their chosen profession. Escape/stimulation described adults who sought a way to alleviate boredom of daily routines and overcome the frustrations of everyday life. Adults who pursued knowledge for its own sake had cognitive reasons for participating.

In an examination of the 1991 National Household Education Survey (NHES:91), Kopka and Peng (1993) reported that participants cited job-related reasons most often for their participation in adult education. Other reasons however, included personal development and obtaining a college degree or diploma. Undoubtedly, work related motives appear to be the most dominant reason for adult education participation (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982).

As the foregoing discussion suggests, adults participate in adult education for a variety of reasons, however most appear to be job related. However, this can be

contributed to the formal contexts in which most adult education studies are based. Hence, to provide a better understanding of adults' motivations within an informal setting, Isaac (1999) conducted her study within the African American church. While some of her findings were similar to those earlier reported, she also determined that adults are motivated for other reasons. Adults participated in church-based education because of the church's familiar cultural setting, for spiritual and religious development, for the love of learning, support in facing personal challenges, family togetherness, service to others, and social interaction. Of the seven factors found in her study, familiar cultural setting, support in facing personal challenges and family togetherness proved new insights. Within the same milieu, Atkinson (1994) found six factors that explained adults' motivations in the church. They were personal, spiritual growth, obedience to God, ministry preparation, cognitive interest, community service and social contact.

An examination and synthesis of the literature pertaining to adults' motivations reveals that adults are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. Contemporary studies have been useful in aiding our understanding of adults' motivations to participate in adult education. Life transitions can be the impetus for participating in adult education. Most transitions that precipitate learning are career oriented. Adults participate for a variety of reasons. They participate for social reasons and to serve others. Some adults participate because they enjoy learning. Yet others participate to enhance their communication skills. However, more often than not, they are motivated to participate in adult educational activities for employment-related reasons. But, when examined in different contexts, additional reasons surface. In addition to adult motivations, another area of concern within adult education participation is those factors that deter or inhibit adult involvement.

ADULT EDUCATION BARRIERS

There are numerous barriers that prevent adults from participating in adult educational activities. Some barriers are dispositional (Cross 1981) or psychosocial (Darkenwald and Merriam 1982) in nature in that an adult may have negative beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions about his or her ability to successfully participate in adult education. For example, a female learner may be reluctant to take an on-line class because she is intimidated by computers and has a belief she can never learn how to use one. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) reported a failure of some adults to use available resources to seek information regarding educational opportunities.

Adults can face many barriers before they even step inside a classroom. Although adults can be culpable for their lack of participation, the institution must look within itself to determine its role in deterring adults from participating in adult education. Hence there are institutional barriers. In some instances there are procedural factors that inhibit participation. In other cases, there are practices that preclude or discourage adult participation. A lack of interesting or relevant courses, poor scheduling, and a lack of communication about course offerings can all serve as institutional barriers.

Some barriers are situational (Cross, 1981) in nature. Barriers such as a lack of transportation, family problems, or a lack of money would fall under this rubric. Thus, if an adult is interested in attending a financial management class in order to be a better steward of his or her money, ironically if a cost is associated with it, he/she may not be able to attend. Time and costs, however, have been cited as the most common barriers.

However, Waldron and Moore (1991) are quick to call some of these barriers as nothing more than excuses. They believe that some barriers to participation are related to “the students’ anxiety level, self-concept, and memories of previous learning experiences which, in many cases, were unpleasant” (p 33).

In an examination of religious education barriers among adult learners, McKenzie (1978) identified several factors of nonparticipation. Some adults were physically incapable of participating. However, there were those who were not physically incapacitated who did not participate because they felt alienated from church activities. On the other hand, other attitudinal issues included a negative attitude towards education, resistance to change, and a non-joining lifestyle. Some adults reported that they were involved in other activities that prevented them from participating. But, an institutional barrier that surfaced was programmatic non-relevance.

Adult education studies on participation aid us in better understanding adults motivations and barriers to adult education outside the classroom. Findings from these studies can aid program planners in developing or enhancing educational programming. However, they fail to help us understand the educator’s role in adult education participation. Thus we now turn our attention to religious educators.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS

There are issues outside the classroom that impact adult education participation. However, once adults enter a learning environment, the educator can either motivate or deter them from learning. Thus, since religious educators are extensions of the institutions they represent, they impact adult education participation.

Religious educators play an important role in the education of adults in church-based educational programs. Their role is to facilitate the personal growth and development of adults (Galbraith, 1998). As Vogel (1991) points out, “teachers of adults in faith communities are called ‘to be a caring conduit into the experience of [their faith community] as a repenting, praying, serving community’ (Dykstra, 1981, p. 129)” (p 157). Religious educators are conductors, in a sense. They give direction in “the sense of giving purpose to the learning occasion and providing structure to the various activities so that the learners may achieve their learning goal (Waldron and Moore, 1991, p 54). To best meet their teaching mandates, religious educators must possess certain attributes.

According to Richards and Bredfeldt (1998), great educators have credibility. In other words, learners should be able to rely on the information they present and see a manifestation of the purity of their motives. They should exude warmth and friendliness, and demonstrate their passion for teaching. Effective communication skills are also important for religious educators. To effectively communicate, Richards and Bredfeldt suggest that instructors should be clear about the content, purpose, structure, and presentation of their material. Best qualities of educators are those who demonstrate an interest in students and subject matter, possess good personalities and are objective in dealing with students and presenting subject matter (Galbraith, 1998). Other qualities include confidence in abilities, in particular teaching ability; knowledge of subject matter; and flexibility in using different instructional techniques and methods. Furthermore, they should have tact and integrity. A good teacher is one that is As Gadsden (1993) that is able to get all learners involved leaves them feeling more knowledgeable and better than

when they entered (Gadsden, 1993). In summary, educators of adults must “possess personality characteristics, interpersonal skills, and positive behaviors” (Galbraith, p 5).

The first few minutes in a class are crucial. At this point a religious educator can significantly stimulate adults’ interest or completely turn them off. Richards and Bredfeldt (1998) suggest one way of stimulating interest is to involve learners in the learning process. This is an aspect of self-directed learning. Learners can be involved in the learning process when they are allowed to take responsibility for their learning and determine their own learning needs (Knowles, 1988). Religious educators must be sensitive to the needs of all persons and be in touch with what is going on in the “real world” (Vogel). According to Manternach (2002) “It is important for teachers to know what the issues are, to have a sense of their own beliefs about them, to understand the ways others see the issues” (p 274). Religious educators should serve as co-learners. Thus “teaching should be mutual, rather than hierarchical, and reflect the ideas of shared leadership between church professionals and lay persons” (Vogel, 1991, 160).

Religious educators must understand the importance of and establish the right learning environment or climate. “It is the space that engenders mutual trust so that educators and learners can be present to each other (Vogel, p 104). In doing so, educators must be sensitive to the physical and social environment. The social and emotional environment is vitally important and should be welcoming, affirming, and safe. Such an environment should enable people to confront and move beyond their assumptions and beliefs. The learning environment should exude warmth whereby learners feel cared about. There should be mutual trust between the learners and among the learners and the class facilitator. As such, the learners perceive one another, and sense that the instructor perceives them as bringing into the learning environment a reservoir of experience that is a rich resource for learning (Knowles, 1980). The learning environment should be conducive to dialogue. In other words, learners should feel comfortable asking questions and expressing their feelings. Hence the environment must be inviting. It should also be supportive and caring (Knowles). The environment should feel safe and unthreatening. Learners should feel that their opinions and experiences would be respected.

Religious educators not only have to possess the appropriate characteristics, they must also know how, at the onset and throughout the learning experience, to create a climate that will capture and maintain the attention of adult learners. They have to attenuate any fears or trepidation learners may have and maintain an open learning environment.

METHODOLOGY

In-depth focus group interviews were the primary methods of data collection. The group interviews allowed us to gain the perspective of the participants into their unique insights and perceptions of religious educational activities in the church. Participants were allowed to share and express their stories without concern for the words or expressions they used. As such, we were able to gain more information and develop greater insights into the phenomena under investigation.

A total of four focus groups sessions were conducted to uncover issues related to the educator as a motivation or barrier to participation. The sessions were conducted in



two large metropolitan areas—one in the North and the other in the Southeast. There were a total 17 women and 12 men. Among the four focus groups, the participants ranged in age from 21 to 81 and consisted of laity, an assistant pastor, pastors, a Christian education professor, and two Christian educators. The educational level ranged from high school graduates to terminal degree recipients. One participant was a practicing pharmacist. Although the denominational affiliations of the group members varied (i.e., Baptist, Methodist, etc.), they were all of the Christian faith.

The data was analyzed using content analysis. Using such an approach enables researchers to establish any frequency in viewpoints, terms or utterances, or certain ideas in a body of material (Merriam and Simpson (1995). Since focus group discussions were used to collect data, content analysis enabled us to determine possible emergent themes. Theme analysis is the process of recovering a theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of a piece of work (Van Manen, 1990).

FINDINGS

Upon a detailed analysis of the group session comments, three themes emerged. They reflect how the religious educator serves a motivation and a barrier to participation in church-based educational programs. They were 1) Interpretational, 2) Individual/Personal, 3) and Instructional Techniques and Methods.

Interpretational

This theme represented those issues that were philosophically or theologically in agreement or disagreement between the learners and those of the religious educator and the educator and the church leader. In reference to interpretations, one respondent stated, “Their (instructors) ideas or thought process will agree with the church.” This, in essence, could serve as a motivation for participation, because there appears to be no conflict with what is taught on Sundays and in the classroom. From a different perspective, many participants reported that they did not share or agree with the viewpoints of the instructor. Thus serving as a barrier to participation in church-based adult education. Another respondent with a similar sentiment indicated, “The . . . interpretation is far off from the teaching of the pastor. Therefore, it’s divisive.” These participants wanted to have one voice to represent the basic theological tenets of the church. On the other hand, some participants indicated they enjoyed hearing different viewpoints presented. Also associated with this theme is the congruence between the teachings of the instructor and the teachings of the church leader. As one respondent stated, “Instructors should be on the same religious educational level or background as the pastor.” Some felt that the “untrained” instructors were sharing their own unique theological perspective, there again, causing a misinterpretation of the lessons in the minds of the learners. The interpretational theme appeared to center on the degree of religious training or spiritual background of the instructors and how the subjects are dealt with and presented to the learners.

Individual/Personal

In addition to the perceptions or viewpoints participants were feeling, there were notions regarding the individual traits or personal characteristics of instructors. A motivation for some adults to participate was the personality of the instructor. For example, a respondent stated, “If the teacher is a righteous or moral person, I think people

would be willing to attend his class.” It was assumed that an individual teaching at a church would have a certain background. This was espoused by the comment, “An instructor at the church would have more of a religious background.” Thus, the belief is the individual would be better prepared to teach religious-oriented topics and this would subsequently serve as a motivation for participation. In another vein, it was stated that individuals were motivated to participate if they could tell that the teacher had a hunger to teach or it appeared that the teacher really wanted to help learners. The educator’s personal characteristics turned learners off and therefore served as a barrier to learning. A barrier to participation was the lack of “qualifications” of the instructor. For example, one respondent stated, “I believe the qualifications of the instructor are questioned more if the instructor is a layperson teaching than if the instructor is a member of the clergy or the pastor of the church.” Hence, if the instructor is not a clergy member, it could serve as another barrier to participation. Some respondents felt the person teaching should be on the same level as the pastor. Other respondents noted the personal traits of the instructor. For example, it was reported that the “teacher brings personality with them.” On the other hand, it was reported that, “The instructor isn’t qualified spiritually to lead the class.” This, in essence, judges the instructor’s character as a credible source for information. Surprisingly, a deterrent within this theme was the gender of the instructor. In some churches females hold less important roles. For instance, denominations or churches do not recognize female ministers. Respondents indicated some people do not participate because the instructor is female.

Instructional Techniques and Methods

As with formal settings, instructional techniques and methods can impact an adult’s motivation to learn. One respondent reported that she was motivated when instructors made learning easy and explained things in the simplest form. Furthermore, it was reported that a good instructor “didn’t force people to speak.” One respondent noted her frustration at having a particular instructor that “felt compelled to have everyone participate in the discussion by vocalizing his opinions on the topic at hand.” While it is unclear why this was frustrating, it may be that the learner only wanted to hear the viewpoint of the instructor because she saw the instructor as the “expert” in the subject matter. While in some instances the instructor is knowledgeable of the subject matter, he or she cannot adequately convey this information to the learners. Or, as one respondent suggested, “Some instructors are unprofessional in their delivery.” In other words, the instructional technique used is not appropriate for the learners. Another concern was the lack of interaction among the learners and the instructors. Some respondents indicated they wanted more discussions. A respondent who stated, “Adults have experiences to share and new and different ideas to share”, espoused this. Adult religious education classes were compared to a worship service, in that “Some instructors take this opportunity as their time to talk for an hour.” Hence, like the preacher with his or her sermon, no one is able to ask questions or make comments when the instructor lectures throughout the entire class period. Thus it would appear that learners do not want to hear the instructor lecture throughout an entire class session. Another issue in this category is rigidity. Since some faith-based offerings are based on a scriptural text, there is a feeling that the dialog is too structured and closed. The instructors are not pliable in their teaching method and do not offer the learners the opportunity to explore related topics. On the other hand, it appears that the open dialogue can be problematic, because a

respondent stated, “I am turned off by the personal debates that sometimes occur.” Most respondents seemed to agree that if an instructor does not teach in a lively manner it could be a turn off.

CONCLUSION

Understanding adult participation is essential in developing effective church-based adult educational programs. Although there are external factors that impact adult education, the religious educator’s theological interpretations, background characteristics, and instructional techniques or methods impact adult education participation. Therefore, while it may be tempting to readily allow anyone who expresses an interest in teaching a church-based class to do so, as the foregoing discussion suggests, caution must be taken in the selection of religious educators.

While it may have been the perception of different viewpoints presented or the manner in which the instructor shared information, there is a definite need for more supervision of individual instructors to ensure their teachings are in line with the church doctrine and that questions are answered appropriately. Instructors may not know or understand the confusion learners have with the instruction. If the instructor’s viewpoints are in agreement with the church’s there is a possibility that more adults might participate in the church’s educational programs. On the other hand, the lack of congruence, could serve as a deterrent. The background characteristics of the instructor also seem to impact adult education. It appears that participants may want the instructors to hold legitimate religious teaching credentials to ensure the instructors are adequately prepared.

Adults have different learning styles. Therefore, one instructional method should not be used consistently within the classroom. Hence, while some may feel comfortable with the lecture method, others might prefer that more discussion methods are employed in the classroom. An integral part of the entire teaching and learning process is students learning from and with each other. Some adults need to hear the lessons in a variety of formats, such as small and large group discussions and video. Nonetheless, instructors must use a variety of techniques as to capture and maintain adults’ interest and to encourage their participation in other church-sponsored educational programs.

The findings from this study suggest that religious institutions should review their selection of religious educators and their training programs. Future research could examine or explore alternative methods of instruction such as video use, or use of computers for individual and classroom instruction. Research could focus on on-line religious education or an individualized home study approach to enhance motivation and further reduce barriers to adult participation in adult religious education. Additional research should address the training of religious instructors so they can have an arsenal of methodologies available to use in teaching. The question of gender bias was raised in this study, however more work needs to be done in this area in order to understand how gender can motivate or serve as a barrier to adult religious education.

While an exploration of the moral character of the instructor may be an issue, the issue should be addressed by Christian education administrators to ensure learners focus on the teachings and not the teacher. The instructor is human and therefore, is subject to the frailty of human behavior. Future research should focus on adult religious education across the denominations. An understanding of how other denominations select, train and prepare teachers for religious education could bring new ideas and methods to adult religious education. According to Havighurst (1965) “the church teaches knowledge,

habits, attitudes and beliefs” (p 11). Havighurst maintains that, “the process by which the church teaches is better called socialization than instruction” and notes “the entire church is a teaching program.” Yet an essential ingredient in having the church members teaching and learning from each other is understanding the role of adult religious education in the church and what motivates and serves as barriers to learning.

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