

PLANNING
for
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
FORMATION

*For Tom and Sammi
on their first year.*

*With loving appreciation for
Connie, Kristin, Lauren, and Alexandra,
my parents and extended family,
and the congregations and Christian friends
who have been my companions in life and ministry.*

PLANNING
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CHRIStIAN **E**DUCATION
FORMATION

*A Community
of Faith Approach*

Israel Galindo • Marty C. Canaday



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Cover art: Photodisc

Cover and interior design: Elizabeth Wright

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

10 11 12 13 14 15

EPUB: 978-08272-30187 EPDF: 978-08272-30194

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Galindo, Israel.

Planning for Christian education formation : a community of faith approach / Israel Galindo, Marty C. Canaday.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 135).

ISBN 978-0-8272-3011-8

1. Christian education. 2. Spiritual formation. I. Canaday, Marty C. II. Title.

BV1471.3.G355 2010

268—dc22

2009047117

Printed in United States of America

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Special acknowledgments to:

Judy Bennett, Steve Booth, Bob Dibble, Vanessa Ellison,
Mike Harton, Terry Maples, Nathan Taylor,
and Fred Skaggs

for their help in making this a better book.

Introduction

This book will help church education leaders address the following questions: Does your church know how Christian faith is formed? Does your church have an intentional process for developing an effective Christian education ministry? How do you determine what contributes to and what impedes effective Christian formation in your congregation? What informing theology guides your church's education practice? Do you know the differences between program-centered approaches and a community-of-faith approach to Christian education?

This book was born during a conversation. The authors of this book work in different contexts in the field of religious education. One is a congregational Christian educator engaged in the practice of religious education in the local parish. The other is a seminary professor who teaches religious education and congregational studies. Both consult with congregational staff and lay leaders. During a conversation they became aware that one of the most frequent cries for help they receive is about how to plan and organize the education ministry in the local church. Often these phone calls come from recent seminary graduates who failed to have the foresight to take any Christian education courses during their formal seminary training. Many other phone calls or e-mails come from laypersons or newly hired church staff persons who do not have training or experience in education planning and organization. Most of these persons practice Christian education by maintaining existing education programs and structures, and ordering a series of convenient published curricular or program resources. The time comes when they realize that their un-systematic approach is ineffective. Programs wane, people lose interest and stop attending, teachers get discouraged, and the church's education program gets stale and "stuck."

Many churches fail to understand the unique *corporate* nature of Christian education formation. Few congregational education leaders seem to actually understand what "faith formation" is and how to plan

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and organize an education program with that orientation. Traditional approaches to congregational Christian education have tended to use “schooling-instructional” models and methods for educating in faith. We will argue that instruction is both important and necessary, but is limited in its ability to address the dynamics of how congregations form faith. Many churches have not only kept the old education wineskins, they’ve also not been able to discover new wine. They perpetuate a benign education program that makes little impact on participants.

Maria Harris helped redefine the concept of curriculum.¹ Her central message is we are what we do. Our understanding of Christian education and the way we plan the education programs of the church will determine the extent to which we can help persons be formed into “Christlikeness.”

Morton Kelsey suggested that Christian education may be more effective if it used religious principles in teaching Christianity.² This book contends that most congregational leaders lack a theological framework and thus rely on educational approaches that are not congruent with how faith actually develops in a corporate faith community context. To be effective, Christian education must use educational approaches congruent to its nature and purpose.

We are advocating a different way of approaching the Christian education ministry in the local church. The *Christian education formation approach* takes seriously two realities in congregations. First, while congregations organize themselves in institutional forms, they are by nature communities of faith. Congregations must make it possible for members to “be in community” while being responsible stewards of their institutions. Second, formation, more so than schooling, brings about spiritual growth for individuals and communities of faith. *Christian education formation* represents an approach that takes these two often paradoxical realities into account without denying either.

Thomas Groome told religious educators, “If we only want people to ‘learn about’ religious traditions, then schooling is enough. But if we want them to “learn from” a tradition, perhaps to ground their spiritual identity in it, then schools and formal programs, although vital, will not be sufficient.”³ The growing interest in spiritual formation, and its attention to the dynamics of faith formation, offers a more hopeful way for congregations to help their members grow in faith.

The premise of this book is that congregations, by their nature, are authentic communities of faith. Therefore, congregational leaders need to plan and organize the ways of learning for the congregation

congruent to its nature. The framework provided for planning Christian education formation from a faith community approach includes the following:

1. The use of the Christian Church Year as an organizing framework for planning and designing formational education programs and events;
2. The organization of an effective *Christian Education Leadership Team*;
3. The creation of effective administrative and organizational processes and structures;
4. The theological assessment of the cultural context of the congregation's practices in light of the community of faith perspective;
5. The use of education approaches congruent with corporate, communal, and individual faith formation.

This is a practical handbook for planning an effective Christian education ministry for community and individual formation. The principles identified in the book will help your education leaders move beyond being uncritical consumers of educational products that perpetuate ineffective programs that are not congruent with the nature of corporate and individual faith formation. You and your education leaders will gain a new lens that will allow you to minister more effectively in your unique education leadership roles.

Five premises inform this book's education approach:

- First, a congregation is an authentic community of faith. It shapes the faith of its members in the ways that communities do—not in the way a school does.
- Second, for learning in the domain of faith two principles apply: (1) you learn to do what you do and not something else that you have acquired intellectually or emotionally, and (2) *how* you learn is *what* you learn.
- Third, the goal of Christian education formation in the congregational setting is the formation of individuals into the likeness of Christ as members of a community of faith.
- Fourth, the result of effective Christian education formation is discipleship: living a life of obedience to God and responding to God's call to personal spiritual growth and service to and through the Church.
- Fifth, effective Christian education formation is *real* education. Leaders must give attention to sound education processes:

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identifying program goals; planning objectives; conducting assessments; and practicing supervision, administration, and planning.

The book consists of three parts. Part I will provide an orientation to the perspective of planning for Christian education formation in the congregational setting. This part will provide the theological framework for understanding your congregation as an authentic community of faith. This foundation will help you refocus the Christian education enterprise in your church from programs and schooling models to the communal and formation model.

Part II provides the “nuts and bolts” for planning and organizing a Christian education formation program from a faith community approach. You will examine the following topics: the organization and work of your leadership team, how to create a program structure using the Christian Church Year, and how to select appropriate educational approaches to meet your education goals.

Part III will address two critical areas of education practice: education assessment and how to address the issues related to changing your congregation’s culture and practice as you move toward the community-of-faith approach.

PART I: Orientation to Planning
Perspectives

*The Theological Framework of
a Christian Faith Community*

1

A Community-of-Faith Approach to Christian Education Formation

Few Christian educators will admit that the way we have been educating people in faith over the last fifty years is not very effective. Even fewer will admit that the current practices of the local congregation have failed to result in the kind of spiritual maturity we desire to see in our church members. The unspoken truth of Christian education today is that the educational practices of the past have not served us well in shaping persons in “Christlikeness” because they run counter to the way people need to be educated in faith. A better way to facilitate the process of Christian education is congruent with how Christian faith is actually formed in the context of a community of faith.

The community-of-faith approach posits that the members of a congregation are formed in the context of its culture as they participate in the corporate practices of faith. In other words, the congregation itself, as a type of community of faith, forms the faith of its members. Robert K. Martin wrote, “Education must be broadly conceived to include the relatively implicit means by which people learn even without knowing that they are learning.”¹

A Search Institute report titled *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations* suggested seven climates of congregational life that help foster faith maturity:²

Seven Climates of Congregational Life

1. **Warmth**—Friendliness and welcoming atmosphere
2. **Thinking**—Intellectual engagement consisting of thinking and discussion
3. **Caring**—Experiencing the care of others
4. **Service Orientation**—Involvement of members in outreach and ministry
5. **Worship**—Variety, flow, and involvement in worship
6. **Parent Education**—Helping parents strengthen skills as religious educators at home
7. **Education**—Strong and vibrant education program for all ages

Congregations must provide for these seven climates to effectively educate in faith. The study found that Christian education is the most important practice within congregational life for helping people grow in their faith. “Done well, it has the potential beyond any other congregational influence to deepen faith and commitment. Knowledge of its importance makes the need for educational revitalization all the more urgent.”³ The right changes can improve education effectiveness in congregations and help their members grow in their faith. Every congregation, no matter how small, has within it the very resources needed to offer an effective Christian education formation program. “Ecclesial life *is* already constituted by relationship (*koinonia*), rituals and patterns of action (*leitourgia*), individual and corporate knowledge (*didache*), the ways we serve (*diaconia*), and the vision and purpose of our life together (*kerygma*),” claims Robert K. Martin.⁴

In recent years, the thirst for relevance in congregational life has given birth to changes in worship and music styles. Unfortunately, rather than seeing all aspects of congregational life as the local church’s greatest education asset, many congregations are ignoring the research and trying to “fix” the church by offering diverse worship styles to divergent audiences. This clearly indicates that many congregational leaders do not appreciate the communal nature of the local congregation and how persons need to be educated in faith in a communal context. Isolating one part of congregational life from others, or one population group from others, in an attempt to reclaim the relevancy of church, or as an anxious response to predilections of taste, will not result in spiritual growth and Christian transformation.

Schooling vs. Community Formation

Planning for Christian education formation from a community-of-faith approach will require a shift in our thinking about the nature of Christian education in the local church. If the church is to be effective in Christian education formation, it must be true to its nature. The chart below illustrates the shift that needs to happen. It depicts two contrasting approaches to religious education. The left column names universal education categories. These categories apply to any education enterprise: a university, a college, a seminary, a training program, a Christian elementary school, or a congregation's education program. Clarity about how these categories need to be applied will help determine the effectiveness of any particular education enterprise.

Figure 1–1: Religious Instruction and Formation Education in Contrast

CATEGORIES	RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION (Schooling Model)	FORMATION EDUCATION (Community-of-Faith Model)
Context	Classroom	Community of Faith
Content	Text or Creed	The Person of Jesus Christ
Approach	Didactic (instructional)	Relational
Outcome	Mastery of Content	Becoming in Relationship
Methods	Instruction	Dialogical

The middle column depicts the appropriate ways of applying the categories in a school setting. The context for instruction is the classroom, an environment that naturally fosters the roles of teacher and student. The content of instruction is the particular text or creed under study—the Bible, a particular text or book, a topic of study, or a course of instruction. The appropriate educational approaches to use are didactic and instructional ways of teaching and learning. The effective practice of instruction requires the use of rigor, specific, and measurable learning outcomes. Those academic outcomes are related to mastery of the content—understanding and application of concepts, comprehension of principles, evidence of critical thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation), etc.

By way of contrast, the right column depicts a community-of-faith approach to Christian education formation. The context in which educating in faith happens is the community of faith, the church. The content of a community of faith is its relationship with Jesus

Christ. This approach assumes you are a Christian by who you know, not by what you know. The appropriate approach in a communal context is relational, not didactic. The ultimate purpose of Christian teaching and learning is to lead persons to a relationship with a living person—Jesus Christ. The learning outcome for Christian formation is thus more about developing relationships than gaining knowledge, or, as Paul put it, to “grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Eph. 4:15). The only methods that facilitate growth between persons are dialogical. Dialogical methods—friendships, mentoring, apprenticeships, discipleship—are those that promote deep sharing, mutual accountability, vulnerable transparency, and self-revelation. In Paul’s words, “But [whoever] loves God is known by God” (1 Cor. 8:3) and, “[T]hen I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).⁵

Paradoxically, congregations, as authentic communities of faith according to their nature, have the assets to be effective in the faith formation of their members, but they consistently choose an education model that is primarily instructional in nature—an educational approach incongruent with both the nature of church and the way faith is formed. How a congregation answers the question, “Is a congregation by nature a school for religious education, or a community that shapes faith through shared communal life?” will determine how a congregation goes about its planning and what practices it provides to form and transform the lives of its members. This is the watershed question that will tilt congregational practice toward effectiveness or ineffectiveness in faith formation.

The evidence appears clear. Schooling approaches to Christian education are not effective for faith formation. To advocate a move from instructional approaches should not be construed as arguing for any less rigor or discipline in the practice of Christian education in the local church. Nor should it be interpreted as devaluing knowledge, critical thinking, or intellectual discipline. A mature faith is a critical faith—it can reflect on its experience and is not naïve. Padraic O’Hare put it, “More simply and succinctly, religious education must have a dual purpose: the evoking of devotion and the promotion of inquiry.”⁶

False Assumptions Lead to False Practices

A failure to understand and appreciate how faith is formed in the context of a community of faith can lead to ineffective practices in Christian education. False assumptions about educating in faith

lead to “false practices” in a church’s education ministry. The first false assumption is that people can be schooled in faith. This false assumption confuses religious instruction with faith formation. Robert K. Martin asserts, “The primary context and means of educational activity is participation in the forms of ecclesial life.”⁷ The context in which faith formation happens is in a community of faith, not a “school.” It is appropriate to “school” students in an educational institution, such as a school or seminary, but a congregation educates its members in faith through formation mediated by its culture and the quality of relationships cultivated within the community of faith.

The second false assumption is that the teacher is the agent for learning. This assumption fails to appreciate how learning actually happens, and also perpetuates the over-focus on instruction in the church’s approach to Christian education formation. This leads to the practice of teaching-by-telling as the mode for learning faith. Teaching-by-telling does not work, because it does other people’s thinking for them. Asked, “On any given Sunday, who is the person that has learned the most at the end of the lesson?” a group of church teachers always answers immediately: “The teacher!” Asked, “Why is that so?” they answer correctly: “Because the teacher studied the lesson.” The next obvious question is, “Then why do we expect our students to learn when we deny them the very process that brings about learning?”

The learner is the agent of his or her own learning. Instead of allowing learners to engage in the *process of study* for themselves, we attempt to plant insight by teaching-by-telling. The result is the formation of passive learners who are perpetual “pupils” in the life of faith, perpetually dependent on a teacher for learning. The paradox here is that to be perpetually dependent on another for one’s growth in the life of faith only ensures that one never will.⁸

A third false assumption is that children (and youth) cannot appreciate “adult” corporate worship experiences. This results in our removing children and youth from participating in the corporate worship service of the community of faith. This false assumption fails to appreciate the formative power of shared intergenerational experiences. Communal values are inculcated in the shared experience of corporate practices. Assuming that children and youth do not have the capacity to understand worship ignores two fundamental rules. First, “You learn to do what you do and not something else.” The only way one learns to worship as a member of one’s community of faith is by participating in corporate worship. Second, this assumption fails

to appreciate that worship is not about “understanding.” Worship is a corporate practice of obedience and an opportunity to experience the Holy through formative rituals of practice. To hold intellectual understanding as a criterion for the participation of children or youth (or adults for that matter) is misguided.

A community-of-faith approach to Christian education formation provides a broader epistemology of learning. It takes into account the importance of directly shared experiences as formative to faith and respects the importance of the intuitive acquisition of religious knowledge through participation in the life of faith.

The fourth false assumption commonly practiced in congregations is that the most effective way to educate in faith is through tightly age-graded and group-segregated educational programming. When congregations follow this practice, nearly all children’s, youth, and adult educational activities occur in isolation from the rest of the community of faith—not to mention the unfortunate segregation of family members one from another as soon as they walk in the church doors. That is not how people learn in faith communities. Faith communities teach via corporate intergenerational, cross-generational, and intra-generational connections and relationships. Robert K. Martin states, “The educational ministry of a congregation should give greatest priority to engaging people in the fellowship, practices, and ministries of ecclesial life. Secondary forms of education, namely, instruction and other schooling practices, should support and intensify the participation of persons in the primary forms of ecclesial life.”⁹ So clearly, your congregation *should not* eliminate all classroom or age-graded programs. They serve their purposes. You *should* change the way you understand and practice Christian education formation by moving toward a community-of-faith approach—one informed by the life of worship lived out in all aspects of congregational life.

Martin correctly states, “Compartmentalization in ecclesial life ineluctably leads to fragmentation in the church’s ministries and territorial divisiveness among the leadership. We need ways of conceiving the church that reveal its organic unity and yet acknowledge the marvelous plurality within it.”¹⁰ Effective planning must follow this important principle of relational integration of learning in the congregation’s education programming.

Children need intergenerational experiences for their spiritual formation. Separating them from the congregation at worship and segregating them in church programs that exclude them from the larger life of the congregation is a spiritual disservice to them. Children

and youth hear lip service given to the idea that they are an important part of the church, but their experiences teach them differently. When denied full participation, children and youth lose educational values inherent in being a part of the larger community of faith and the communal formation that is necessary for faith development. Dean Blevins contends, “Persons are shaped into Christian character and transformed doxologically as they participate faithfully (i.e., intentionally) in the discrete practices that identify the life of the faith community.”¹¹

A grandmother approached me after a Wednesday evening church meal. She had started bringing her two grandsons to church on Wednesday evenings for the meal and educational activities. She expressed concern that her grandchildren were overhearing prayer requests at the start of the meals related to some scary things: illnesses, accidents, hospitalization, cancer, anxieties, and deaths. I agreed with her that those were scary things, but that she was missing something else that was happening. Her grandchildren were witnessing how members of a community of faith share their anxieties and worries with one another. Her grandchildren were learning how members of a church had a place to share their concerns openly and how they prayed for one another. They were learning that it was unnecessary to keep scary things to themselves, because the faith community is a safe place to share those fears. They were learning that even adults had fears, but that they trusted those fears to God through prayer and found support from their church. I pointed out that her grandchildren were also overhearing some good things people were sharing—answers to prayers, celebrations, and expressions of love for one another. It was quite dramatic to see the “Aha!” moment she experienced as she realized that her grandchildren were really learning how a community of faith works.

We are, and become, what we do. Children who are encouraged to participate in the act of giving an offering during corporate worship learn that giving is a communal responsibility and not just a personal matter. Our theology shapes our practices, and our practices shape our faith. The patterns and practices of our community of faith become a mutual way of life. To be Christian is to be a part of the body of Christ and to participate fully in the church—conforming to, and being formed into, the likeness of Christ. Daniel Ciobotea reminds us, “The book of Acts underlines very clearly the importance of the gathered community as a place of spiritual formation and theological experience, since the Holy Spirit descends on the community which

is persevering in prayer ‘with one mind,’ while the disciples are ‘all together in one place’ (Acts 2:1).”¹²

Conclusion

The community-of-faith approach to Christian education formation is communal in nature and appreciates that relationships in the context of a congregation mediate Christian formation. The congregation is a community of faith. This construct is vital to understanding how a church needs to plan its education ministry. Intergenerational experiences, experiential learning, worship, and reflection, to mention just a few, are essential education practices of the communal nature of congregational life. In the next chapters we turn our attention to these and other principles of this particular approach to Christian education formation, one that acknowledges that, because a local congregation is a community of faith, it requires a planning process that is sensitive to how faith is formed in a communal context.