

## Five Ways People Approach Christian Education

Over recent years, a range of approaches to Christian education has been suggested and discussed (see, for example, Seymour, 1997). Most of these approaches have been grounded in theory rather than in the empirical analysis of the approaches people adopt. The following account draws pictures of various approaches people as identified in the responses to a survey. It focuses on adult Christian education in congregational life, and does not systematically cover such approaches as might be adopted among children or in schools. It is based primarily on the National Survey on Christian Education undertaken in 2000 by Uniting Education, a national body responsible for leadership in Christian Education within the Uniting Church in Australia, and by the Christian Research Association, an inter-denominational research body.

The Uniting Church in Australia was formed in 1977 through a merger of the Methodist Church, a large part of the Congregational Church, and about two-thirds of the Presbyterian Churches. The survey followed extensive group discussions in a stratified sample of approximately 30 congregations about the nature and functioning of Christian Education. In preparation for the survey, a list was compiled of all Uniting Church congregations in Australia: a total of 1464. From this list, 340 congregations were randomly selected, and sufficient questionnaires were sent to each of these congregations to be completed by all adults over the age of 15 years who would attend services on one particular Sunday. Two hundred and thirty congregations participated, and a total of 4757 questionnaires were returned. It has been calculated that this is a response rate of approximately 41 per cent of the attenders of the 340 selected congregations (Hughes and Bond, 2000). The sample is sufficient to give an accurate general picture of the majority of Uniting Church attenders. A range of statistical methods were used in the analysis. Factor analysis of responses of responses to a set of questions about what content people wanted in Christian education provided the key to four out of the five approaches outlined in this article. The fifth approach was evident among those who were not interested in any particular content to formal Christian education.

Background information about the Australian population has been provided by another survey referred to in this article as the Australian Community Survey. This survey was conducted in 1998 among a national sample of the Australian adult (18 years and over) population by Edith Cowan University (Perth) and the National Church Life Survey research team (based in Sydney). The Australian Community Survey contained many questions about religion, churches and community. It was completed by 8500 respondents - a response rate of approximately 50 per cent. (For further details of this survey, see, for example, J. Bellamy, et al., 2002, p.130.)

It should be said first and foremost, that the empirical data indicated that most people did not clearly distinguish in their own minds between the approaches to Christian education presented here. Some Uniting Church attenders indicated that they would enjoy Christian education, whatever form it had, while others displayed less interest. This was the dominant factor in people's approaches to Christian education and accounted for 45 per cent of the variance in people's responses to the questions about what they would like in Christian education. In general, the more highly educated wanted more Christian education, except in the area of strengthening personal faith and closeness to God, while people with less formal education had less interest in most areas of Christian education. Younger attenders wanted more Christian education, while there was a lower level of interest among attenders over the

age of 60 years.

With that caveat, we may distinguish some approaches.

### **1. Learning the Christian heritage**

As a broad generalisation, it might be argued that for most people, the focus of Christian education has been on passing on the heritage of faith. The major task of Christian education has been to teach children the faith: the Bible stories, the doctrines and the values in which faith is embedded. Through such teaching the faith has been passed from one generation to the next, as a significant part of life and culture.

The Christian story, made vivid in the Bible stories and summarised in the doctrines and creeds, provided a sense of identity. It reminded people that they were important to God and had a place in the history which God was unravelling. Out of that sense of identity came values for life in society.

Adults who valued such forms of Christian education have not always attended church themselves, but have seen it important that their children learn the basic story and values of the Christian faith. The faith was seen as containing the basis for the structures of society, the values of care (and authority) on which family life was founded: the values of hard work and honesty on which patterns of employment and business were predicated, the values of duty, respect and authority on which the structures of community life was established.

The Australian Community Survey found that among Australians aged 70 years or over, 85 per cent remembered a time when they went frequently to church. However, half of them indicated that they had dropped out of church life when children or teenagers (Hughes, Bellamy, Black and Kaldor, 2000, p.170).

The importance of religious education as passing on the heritage of faith remains high among some groups in Australia and is particularly strong among communities of recently arrived immigrants. Many of these people see religion as part of the way through which cultural and communal life will be retained over generations in the new context.

For many such groups, learning the ethnic language is associated with religious training. Methodists from Pacific islands, Muslims from Lebanon, Buddhists from Vietnam, Orthodox Christian children from Greece attend schools on the week-ends associated with their religious communities, learning the language, culture, religion and values.

However, many Australians have moved away from the idea that one should impose a particular religious heritage on one's children. Consequently, compared with previous generations, few children are being sent to Sunday School. The Australian Community Survey found that in 1998 among 30 to 39 year olds, 30 per cent had never attended a religious organisation at any point in their lives other than for occasional special event, and among 20 to 29 year olds, 41 per cent had never attended (Hughes, Bellamy, Black and Kaldor, 2000, p.170). It is quite possible that the current teenagers will be the first cohort of Australians since the earliest days of white settlement among whom the majority have never attended religious education within the context of a religious organisation. While many children receive a smattering of religious education at primary school (Hughes, 1998a, p.1), comparatively few are growing up with the experience of involvement in a religious community. The current cohort of teenagers has been raised with the assumption that they

will make their own choices about religion when they come of age.

The sociologist, Anthony Giddens, has argued that Western societies have moved from 'traditional' to 'post-traditional' forms (1994). In a 'traditional society', he says, many cultural traditions, including eating patterns and the structures of relationships, are handed from one generation to the next. In 'post-traditional societies' people put together their own 'culture' as individuals, drawing on a wide range of resources, in terms of such patterns. So, in contemporary Western societies, individuals are developing very different patterns of eating and a wide range of structures in their personal relationships. So also, they are taking responsibility for the nurture and development of their spirituality, often drawing on a global range of resources. While there are enclaves of 'traditional' forms of society within Australia, the culture is rapidly developing 'post-traditional' patterns.

Many younger people in Australia have very little background in any religious faith. Some turn to adult Christian education in order to explore the basics that they never learnt when of Sunday School age. For some, this is part of the process through which they come to an understanding of the religious options and evaluation the various resources of faith.

The National Survey of Christian Education in Uniting Churches showed that there were many who wanted to know more about the faith, about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the church. Some wanted to understand better the traditions to which they had committed themselves. However, others who expressed such interested attended church only occasionally and who evidently had little commitment to the community.

The success of Alpha groups in Australia and other places around the world shows that many people are interested in learning about the Christian story, but do so out of a personal interest (Hughes 1998b, p.27). Part of the success of Alpha groups as been that they have not required participants to be part of a Christian community, but have provided opportunities for people to learn about the content of faith prior to any commitments. It would seem that some people who have taken up such options have approached Christian education not as providing the foundations of a community of which they are part, but for greater understanding of the resources from which they might draw.

## **2. Strengthening the Organisation**

One of the responses to the decline in organised religious life has been to seek ways of strengthening what remains of it. There are many people within the churches who are anxious to improve the quality of church life, attract new people, and maintain the interest of those who attend. Many have realised that some people will only stay involved if they have specific roles to perform such as leading worship or counselling others. On the other hand, they know that others will disappear if the quality of leadership drops or the standards of the music, liturgy, drama and other elements of worship fall.

Others talk about education for mission. While some see this as transforming society, others interpret it, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of enhancing skills which lead to increased church attendances and income for the churches.

The emphasis in such forms of Christian education is on training people to take leadership roles and contributing to the smooth functioning of the organisation. Elders are trained to raise the level of pastoral care, and some are given specific training in counselling. Musicians are given training in church music. As administrative tasks become more complex, training is

established to assist treasurers and secretaries. Everyone is given training in sharing Christian faith with others. Some are trained to work with children or young people. In the name of the ministry of the whole people of God, lay people are trained in pastoral work, evangelism, administration, preaching and participating in worship.

Some find their self-identity in roles in the organisational life of the church. They enjoy being good elders, parish councillors or musicians. However, the majority of Uniting Church attenders indicated clearly that this was not their primary interest. Their focus was on their own spirituality, their relationship with God, and coping with the pressures of everyday life, family, work, and personal relationships.

In the Australian Community Survey (1998), the sample of the adult Australian population were asked to respond to the sentence 'Churches spend too much energy keeping their institutional structures going'. Forty-one per cent of Australian adults agreed, 42 per cent were neutral or unsure, and only 16 per cent disagreed. Many have left the churches because they did not want to spend their time and energy supporting organisational structures which they were felt were unnecessary.

Within the churches, the National Survey of Christian Education found that there was a small group (close to 10 per cent of the attenders of the Uniting Church) who welcomed Christian education which would enable them to perform more effectively within the churches. They were keen to learn how to be better leaders, preachers and elders. Most of these people had high levels of involvement in the organisation. However, most other church attenders had little interest in such forms of Christian education.

### **3. Sharing Community Life**

When asked how they grew in their Christian faith, a majority of Uniting Church respondents said they grew primarily through relationships with other church members, special friends and family. The maintenance of community life, then, is important for Christian education. People grow in faith through enjoying one another's company, supporting each other through good and bad times, and through upholding one another's values, rooted in their commitment of faith.

Formal educational activities were not necessary for those who approached Christian education this way. For many, the weekly worship through which they were reminded of God's love, and the fellowship, through which that love is expressed, was sufficient for their growth in faith. Bible study was for those who were especially enthusiastic. The majority of attenders said they valued supportive relationships greatly and learnt from them as much as from any other activity. They reported that they enjoyed listening to each other's personal stories, talking through how they coped with family crises and personal sickness, and sharing the personal challenges of living life in an increasingly complex society.

The context for this form of 'Christian education' may be the cup of coffee after church on a Sunday morning, or the small group that meets during the week. It may be the working bee, the craft group, the walking group, the men's breakfast, the women's auxiliary, or the singing group. The content is not particularly important, as long as the group is there which provides a 'plausibility structure', to use Peter Berger's term (1973), for the group's way of approaching life and faith and for providing opportunities to share life experiences.

For most Uniting Church people, the congregation operates as a 'special interest-group'. That

‘special interest’ of the Christian faith is strengthened and supported by congregational life. Within that context, Christian education is rather amorphous, constituted largely by the sharing of life experience in a supportive environment.

#### **4. Social Transformation**

There are those within the Uniting Church who see the *raison d’être* of the life of the church as being the transformation of society. The church is there to bring about justice in society, to protect the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. For these people, the church is about standing for the rights of Aboriginal people, gay people, or ethnic minorities. Or perhaps it is about fighting corporate globalisation or the privatisation of public utilities. Some young people have caught the vision of the needs in developing countries or the injustice within their own. Some people remember the Viet Nam war and the churches’ protests which contributed to Australia’s withdrawal from the jungles of south-east Asia. For some, care for the fragile global environment is an enduring passion.

For these people, there is an important educational element in social transformation. People need to be taught about injustices. They need to be mobilised into action groups. People can learn about changing society both through information that is passed on and through ‘on the job’ involvement in social action.

Most church attenders agree that these issues are important. But their personal priority is their own daily survival, coping with the demands of everyday life. In the National Survey on Christian Education (2000), among Uniting Church attenders

- 10 per cent said they would definitely respond to Christian education on world debt;
- 11 per cent on ethics in the work place;
- 13 per cent on understanding other religions; and
- 14 per cent on reconciliation with Aboriginal people.

On the other hand, 28 per cent said they would definitely respond to Christian education which would help them to feel a greater closeness to God and 24 per cent to Christian education which might help them achieve a greater sense of inner peace and security.

In general, the people interested in social transformation were highly involved in the life of the church and had high levels of formal education. Young people between the age of 20 and 29 had proportionally the highest levels of interest.

#### **5. Nurture of the Spirit**

The Australian Community Survey found that two-thirds of the Australian adult population felt that ‘a spiritual life’ is important, although not necessarily of high priority. In practice, the desire to nurture the spiritual life is often eclipsed by the functions of living, by families and home-making, friends and work. It is sometimes pushed into the background by the many possibilities for having a good time, by entertainment and parties, by sport and holidays. Yet, people do want a sense of meaning and the spiritual life is seen as contributing to that. The ways in which they are seeking to find meaning and a sense of peace and well-being are many. They find such meaning in relationships within the family and in their work. Many find it in being in nature and through music. For 20 per cent of the Australian adult population, religious faith is an important source of meaning and peace (Hughes and Black, 1999, p.128).

Uniting Church attenders seek their sense of meaning primarily in relationships. In common with the wider population, the attention of many is dominated by their families. Indeed, they

said that family life contributed more to their sense of meaning than anything else. Friendship was the second most important source of meaning. Worship services were also important, but less so than close personal relationships. Small group activities were a long way down the list.

People want to nurture the spiritual side of life, to reinforce their sense of meaning and the values which give purpose and structure to their lives. As shown in Figure 1, among the most strongly affirmed areas of Christian education among Uniting Church attenders were education focussed on 'a greater closeness to God', 'a greater sense of peace and security', self-esteem and confidence in faith. For many, the focus is not so much cognitive content, as relational and experiential meaning.

As the nurture of the spirit is seen as something for which the individual rather than the community has prime responsibility, people are identifying a greater range of ways through which it can occur. A book entitled *Beyond Religion: 8 Alternative Paths to the Sacred* lists such methods of nurturing the sacred as re-discovering the feminine dimension of human being, focussing on the arts, the body, nature, relationships or the dark nights of the soul, and exploring psychology and mythology (Elkins, 1998). The individual will turn to whatever resources assist in that nurturing and meaning-making.

The Australian Community Survey (1998) found that 11 per cent of Australian adults had tried Eastern meditation, 9 per cent psychic healing and crystals, and 48 per cent had attended a church within the twelve months prior to the survey. More significantly, 10 per cent of the population had used at least two out of those three resources. Even among church attenders, there is an increasing tendency for people to go outside the Christian faith itself to find helpful resources, perhaps in Eastern meditation or yoga, or in self-help or personal growth groups as the spiritual journey becomes one for which the individual rather than the community takes prime responsibility (Hughes, Black and Kaldor, 2000, p.17).

### **Christian Education in the Future**

Australian society as a whole has moved away from religion as being the basis of community life, the guardian of social values and structures. Christian education is not primarily the inculcation of the heritage of a community. It has become education which assists people in making personal choices rather than encouraging conformity. In a world of mass media presented on a powerful, global scale, it is not realistic to expect that young people will simply absorb the traditions of their parents. Inevitably, people will make choices about the resources they will use in putting their lives together. They cannot be shielded from the wealth of options, but must be prepared for wisely evaluating those options, and making personal decisions and commitments which will give them meaning and enable them to build community.

Adult Christian education will often mean introducing people to the basics of faith. There is evidence of interest even among many who do not attend church in Christian education which presents the basics of the tradition. However, they approach those basics not as the foundations for their own community, but as resources on which they might draw.

There is a place for training people to take their place in organisations. However, the trend is towards light-weight organisational structures. Most Australians do not want to spend more time or energy than necessary on the maintenance of organisational structures that are expensive in terms of buildings, paid employees, and time-consuming committees. Christian

education that is focussed on organisational structures will not engage the many who do not find their *raison d'être* in the organisational life of the churches.

Building the community life of the church as a context for Christian nurture and growth will continue to be important. However, there is always a danger that a focus on building the community can lead to tightening the circle and creating higher boundaries which others will find hard to cross. The focus on the fellowship of the congregation can lead as easily to exclusivism as to a strong sense of belonging.

Social transformation will continue to be important. But for most people, Christian education which focuses on society will not be the starting point for the journey of faith. Often, those people who feel confident in themselves, in their own sense of peace and well-being, in their family life and relationships, find most strength for involvement in the wider society and in meeting the challenges of injustice.

Churches are well placed to provide resources through which the spirit can be nurtured. But they will need to find ways of doing this apart from worship services on Sunday and Bible studies groups during the week if they are to engage the quest for faith and meaning that is taking place in the wider community.

Within the wider community, individuals are exploring a great variety of resources. They value opportunities to try various resources according to their needs and their circumstances. At the moment, the churches offer a limited range, and most of the resources are offered primarily to those who are well and truly entrenched within their structures. In many congregations there are a variety of forms of Christian education, but most made readily available to those who are not involved in the faith community. The options are rarely communicated effectively to the wider community, or even to that large group of people which attends occasionally, often for major festivals such as Christmas or personal celebrations such as marriage.

The average number of people attending a congregation of the Uniting Church in Australia was 51 in 1996 (Kaldor, et al, 1999, p.26). It is doubtful whether a congregation even twice that size could provide a great variety of resources alone let alone publicise them effectively. As groups of congregations work together, however, it is possible that a greater variety of ways could be offered through which people could pursue the quest for meaning and well-being, for example, through festival and art, through discussion and support groups, through worship and meditation, through drama and dance.

There is a great potential for Christian education in the future as resources through which spiritual life may be nurtured. Christian education must be developed on the basis of the Christian heritage for it to be Christian, but it may be packaged to make it available in a variety of forms to the whole community. Such Christian education will need to pay attention to experiential and relational dimensions of spiritual nurture.

For the theological reason that God calls people into community and because people's spirits are nurtured partly through community and through commitment to personal and social transformation, it is important that Christian education involves the construction of pathways towards such ends. However, in the future, Christian education will engage few in the spiritual quest if it demands that people first make a commitment to a congregation, or even to attendance at worship services before involvement. Nor will Christian education engage

people if it assumes they will swallow, at the beginning, the whole package of faith with its peculiar doctrines and creeds. Christian education must engage people at the variety of points where questions are asked and resources are sought, and yet seek to prepare paths through which commitment can be grown and community developed.

We may be optimistic that God will continue to call and to change people, as theology claims that God has done since the dawn of history. The task of Christian educators is to identify and develop the structures through which the churches may participate most effectively in that divine activity.

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### Notes:

1. The Australian Community Survey (1998) was conducted by researchers from Edith

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**2.** A version of this article was first produced for a conference on Christian Education sponsored by Uniting Education in October 2000.