

Christian Education in a Commitment-Challenged Culture

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Not long ago I visited with a group in a Presbyterian congregation who wanted to talk about the current situation of their educational ministries. This group, consisting of parents, Sunday school teachers, associate pastors, and adult leaders of a congregation's youth ministry program, sounded tired and frustrated as they lamented the status of their work. One man in his forties, Doug, started out: "I work with the fifth and sixth grade kids. There is a core group of five or six kids who come to Sunday School at least two or three Sundays a month, but the rest of the group is like a revolving door—in one Sunday, out the next two, then back for a week, then gone for five weeks. It's impossible to build on anything in teaching when we have to keep starting over. It's an entirely different group every week! Parents just won't make a commitment to get their children to church on a regular basis."

Pam, a slightly older woman across the table from Doug, looked down, slightly embarrassed as she nodded her head in agreement. "I know exactly what you mean. Those are *my* children who are the 'revolving door kids.' And believe me, I feel awful about it all the time. Church and Christian education have always been a priority for our family. But suddenly there are soccer games on Sunday mornings, and sleep-overs with kids whose families don't go to any church. I don't want them to start resenting church for being the reason they don't get to do things with their friends—but that's how it would seem to them if I always made them go to church instead of all the other things going on. It's hard, especially when it seems that we are the only family for whom Sunday morning game times are an issue."

There was a brief interruption as two middle school aged youth walked into the room, earphones attaching each of them to tiny electronic devices delivering music individually. They smiled, waved, and, recognizing that a meeting was taking place, turned and left the room, all without speaking, and without interrupting their music listening. "Did you see that," Zoe asked? "That's the other thing that makes it hard. I teach in a private school and we have AV [audio-visual] equipment that means we can integrate digital resources like music, film, and the internet into our teaching. Here at church, it's like we are dealing with dinosaurs, we're so behind the times. Youth aren't going to be interested if we can't use visuals and music."

After a short pause, Maggie, a woman in her fifties who often referred to herself as "one of the few remaining cradle Presbyterians around here," looked quizzically at the group as she recalled that when she was growing up, churches used the technology of the times: record players and filmstrips. "I am not so sure we need all of this new communication technology in the church—blogs and twitters and the rest of it." She then spoke of a childhood time in which the schools along with various community youth programs such as athletics and scouting, all abided by an unwritten rule: Wednesday nights were reserved for church activities. And it went without saying that no sports competitions took place on Sunday mornings. "And if we stayed the night at a friend's house on a Saturday, why, we naturally expected to go to church with their family on Sunday. If they were Methodist instead of Presbyterian, well that was fine. But now they might be Buddhist or Jewish or even nothing at all. Times have changed, I know. But I have a hard time understanding how we got to this place from the way things were when I was growing up. Things sure are different these days. "

“You’re right, Maggie,” said Jeff, a man of around thirty years old, clearly the youngest in the room. “Things *are* different. The youth I work with in our senior high group have always had lots of different choices for how to spend their Sunday mornings. There has never been a time in their lives when Sunday mornings or Wednesday evenings were protected as ‘church time.’ Sometimes I think the problem with our educational and youth ministry is not about anything we do or don’t do. It is about all the other options people have today. In today’s world, church doesn’t have the same role in their lives that it did for some of you. Even for me, church has never been quite the ‘center of activity and life’ that some of you experienced growing up. Maybe that’s not such a bad thing, as long as families still try to teach the basic values of religion and come to church when they can. At least they are still connected to the church. Let’s emphasize the positive instead of always getting down on these kids and their families for what they *aren’t* doing.”

The group went on to talk about how adults in the congregation fell prey to the same patterns of variable participation in church education and church life as did children and youth. Susan, the congregation’s associate minister, and Terry, the certified Christian educator, exchanged a knowing glance suggesting that they had heard (and voiced) these same perspectives many times before. “I can’t decide whether the problem is that people are *overcommitted*, giving themselves to too many things, or *uncommitted*, unable to give themselves to anything. How can we educate for faith in such a time as this?”

What Such Time Is This, Anyway?

Perhaps you hear some themes, both explicit and implicit, in this conversation that resonate with your own context for ministries of education in the church today. Here are a few that I heard this group articulating:

- The neighborhoods and networks in which we live and move are changing. Not only do we and our children live in more religiously plural contexts, coming into contact with people of different Christian families or practicing different faiths altogether, but also we are likely to rub elbows with more and more people who practice no faith.
- Church today is ‘not the only game in town,’ but is one among many institutions and activities in which people can invest themselves. In times and places with fewer options, churches could function in a more central, total way for people who gathered there for worship, recreation, friendship networks, social services, art performances, etc. Now, in most communities there are multiple sites across which persons can situate themselves and commit their energies. This diffusion of investment across multiple institutions results in the possibility that the church as an organization does not mean the same thing to many people today as it did for the lives of those for whom it occupied a more central and overarching position.
- Assumptions that a person’s worlds of church, family, school, and community activities will have overlapping and mutually reinforcing agendas no longer hold. In fact, these spheres may even directly compete with one another.
- Adults of different generations may hold different understandings of the nature of religious commitment and involvement, which in turn relate to differing understandings of the goals and purposes of religious education.
- Parents of children and youth today have spent the number of years equivalent to their children’s ages navigating through and negotiating family priorities, often apart from

guiding family elders or a wider parenting community that shares and upholds together the priorities of religious life.

- Technology is changing human experience, including how people spend their time, relate to one another, work, and learn. The church has been slow to address this reality of contemporary life, and educators, pastors, and parents alike debate the appropriate uses of technology across the church.

These are no small shifts. And while we certainly are not the only generation in the history of the Christian church to stand on the edge of a vast precipice of change, these changes seem to signal something different in the ways we live together in communities of practice, and in how we invite our children and youth into lives of faith. In short, these are the kinds of shifts that seem to have an impact on how and when and why we in the church make commitments. And that is the context in which we engage in the educational ministries of the church today. Commitment in common sense parlance means “stick-to-itiveness”—the ability to persevere, even when it is not convenient, and perhaps even when one’s inclinations would dictate otherwise. Margaret Farley speaks of the way in which all commitments ultimately are grounded in the relational dimension. Commitments, she contends, are ways of covenanting to de-center the self for the sake of love for the other. Unarguably, the church in 2011-- which seeks to educate people in faith and call them to lives of committed discipleship --stands embedded within a commitment-challenged culture.

Reading the Signs of the Times

Where can we go for help in understanding this commitment-challenged culture in which we seek to educate and form people in faith? One useful perspective comes from sociologists of American religion who use mountains of data collected by survey, census bureau information, and interviews, to explore patterns and trends in American religious life. In their recent book, *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*, sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell look across decades of religious change from the pinnacle of church growth during the post-war era of the 1950’s through the present, post-9/11 moment when institutional religious membership continues to decline, particularly in the Protestant “old line mainline” denominations.

What is interesting to me about Putnam and Campbell’s analysis is that they move beyond the simple cause-and-effect ratio between mainline protestant churches and evangelicals that has so preoccupied religious bean counters over the past several decades—I’m referring here to the tendency to understand the decline of the mainline and the rise of evangelical and conservative churches as a matter of sheep-stealing in which one’s loss is the other’s gain. Instead, Putnam and Campbell direct our attention to a far more significant change on the American religious landscape, the growth of the group known as the “none’s.” The real story, they claim, is not whether old line mainline Protestant membership is up or down in relation to evangelical mega churches. The real story is that every time levels of religious participation change in America since the 1960’s, the group that experiences the most significant upward bump in membership is the “none’s.” In 1950 only about 5% of people polled checked “none” when asked about their participation and affiliation with a particular religious group. This number increased to 7% in the

wake of the 1960's, and stayed there through the early 1990's. But after, this number rose to 20-30%.

Putnam and Campbell describe the occurrence across time of this increase in Americans without any church or religious identity using the metaphor of an earthquake: one huge seismic event and two major aftershocks, "successively thrusting a large portion of one generation of Americans in a secular direction, then in reaction thrusting a different group of the population in a conservative religious direction, and finally in counter-reaction to that first aftershock, sending yet another generation of Americans in a more secular direction." (p. 80). On the balance in such a rearrangement, more people end up in the "none"- or secularly defined population.

The huge seismic event was the "long sixties," the decade of the 1960's and the extension of its cultural and social movements into the early 1970's. Coming on the heels of the 1950's postwar years of unprecedented expansion of churches fed by the baby boom, the 1960's shook the church along with the rest of the society. Many people became disillusioned with organized religious institutions in this time, and began an exodus from the churches. Along with other religious institutions, mainline Protestant denominations began to decline in membership.

This decline was followed by a time of reaction against "the long 60's" shifts in power and morality set off a conservative reaction that ushered in a time of numerical decline in the mainline as many moved into more politically/theologically conservative and evangelical churches. Putnam and Campbell describe this conservative reaction of the 1980's as the "first aftershock" from the 1960's earthquake, which put into place the Religious Right in America.

The second aftershock came in the 1990's and carried into the new millennium, as many people—particularly young people—grew disillusioned with the ties between conservative religion and politics. Putnam and Campbell report that the terms "Christian Right" and "Religious Right" became pejorative for many (p. 120), a finding echoed in my interviews with adolescent girls during the same time period. Reactions against the Religious Right did not send disaffected persons into mainline Protestant congregations, however, but moved them in a "decidedly nonreligious direction." In other words, the group whose membership most benefited from the pattern described here as an earthquake and two strong aftershocks is the "none's". Those who remained within a religious identity became increasingly polarized. Putnam and Campbell sum up the situation this way:

"With each seismic expansion of the fissure over this half century, fewer and fewer Americans remained in the center of the religious spectrum, and those at each growing pole became more hostile and suspicious toward their opponents at the opposite extreme." (p. 82)

Educating in a Mainline Protestant Diaspora

While admittedly only part of the picture of church life today, I believe that Putnam and Campbell touch on a reality of major significance in the life of the contemporary church in America, and the Presbyterian Church in particular: we live and work in the Diaspora as a small remnant band of folks trying to discern what it means to be faithful, and invite others into such a life, embedded in a broader social context in which increasing numbers of people are unaffiliated with a religious community at all, and in which lifestyles work against sustained attention and

commitment, and where other life spheres in a secular society (school, work, sports, etc.) do not form overlapping circles of reinforcement with nurturing faith. This is not a new situation—others have noted it before, and other Christians have been in it before—but it is our current reality and we need to acknowledge that in our ways of being church.

But I don't think Christian educators can get away with blaming the secular culture alone for our educational woes. Instead, I want to join Dr. Charles Foster, a longtime educator, historian of education, and professor of religious education, in suggesting that the problem for education in a commitment-challenged society is that the church abandoned young people when it took on certain understandings of education as something that happened in classrooms of a Sunday school for an hour a week, instead of recognizing the formative, educative aspects of its life as a whole and inviting young people into the fullness of that life. Foster's notion of "eventful education" is well-suited to such a time as this, when we live and work and educate for faith in the Diaspora, and when we can no longer count on institutions and norms in the surrounding society in which the church is embedded to provide multiple sites of reinforcement for the formation work we in the church seek to do. "Eventful education" involves congregations in educating by intentional reflection upon the events already going on in the life of the church. We miss so many learning and teaching opportunities simply by our failure to engage in theological inquiry and reflection about our life together in the faith community!

Practice, Practice, Practice

So what hopeful news about educating for faith might we in the churches look to in this commitment-challenged culture? Probably one of the most substantive shifts in Christian education over the past decade has been the recognition of the centrality of *practices*. Presbyterians with our great devotion to the cognitive aspects of faith and our love of words, have long erred in the direction of understanding faith as a set of propositions to be studied, assented to, and examined on by the Session! Practices do not exist in exclusion of cognition. But they are shared activities engaged in over time that embody goods beyond their ends alone. Practices shape the persons who perform them. And in turn, over time persons appropriate and reshape practices within community life, making those practices their own and renewing their meanings (thus our notion of 'always reforming'). When communities engage in sets of practices that together constitute a way of life, those practices mark them with a personal and communal identity. But if educating for faith is about taking on a new identity in Christ, then practicing the faith with others becomes a critical and central aspect of Christian education.

Let me suggest what I mean briefly here, as I have written expansively on this subject elsewhere. Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave, in cross cultural studies of how people in various contexts come to take on the identity of the vocation/profession they seek to enter, note the centrality of participation in the practices of that community. That is, in order to become a plumber, a novice cannot simply read about plumbing or talk *about* it with others. What has to happen in order to learn to talk like plumbers talk and act like plumbers act (that is, take on the identity of being a plumber) is to participate in the practices plumbers engage in—to use the tools, do the work, think about and plan the intervention, clean up the mess afterwards. For youth, children and other newcomers to learn to talk as Christians talk and act as Christians act—that is, take on the patterns of life that are constituted by shared Christian practices—their education in faith cannot be limited to one hour per week in a classroom sitting in chairs around a table exchanging words.

What kind of access do young people have to the core identity-practices of Christian communities, and to opportunities to reflect on those practices with others who guide their participation in the practices?

Real Families, Real Lives, Real Faith

There is no question as to the depth of challenge before us in the church as we seek to educate for faith in a commitment challenged culture. I find myself thinking and talking in two seemingly opposite ways about this situation: on the one hand, I believe that we in the faith community are called to push back against those elements of our culture that attempt to co-opt us into anti-intellectual, dumbed-down, modes of education. In a world of Sunday morning soccer practice with the low prioritizing of church life such an occasion represents in the wider social ecology in which Christian congregations are now situated, surely we need to continue to assert that “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Deuteronomy) and commit to the Christian education necessary to do so! Families, individuals, and congregations can work to resist practices of commodification of time and relationships that endanger human abilities to commit to one another in love.

At the same time, I find myself recognizing—as a mother, as an educator, as a realist—that we in the church also need to come to terms with the social context in which we find ourselves at this time. We need to deal with the realities of our culture, because we cannot opt out completely from the powerful social forces shaping the religious education contexts in which we seek to nurture faith and form people in identities as Christians. In that vein, what I want to suggest is that these two seemingly opposing perspectives may well constitute a paradox in which both features (resistance to the wider cultural context of education, and adaptation to that context) are needed. We are not so much called to choose between these two sides as two separate alternatives, but rather to seek the wisdom of both of them toward educating for faith in the time given to us as twenty-first century Christians.

I close with some provisional clues gleaned from conversations like the one with which this essay opened, and from thinking about educating in such a time as this:

-Since we live and move and have our being in a cultural context that works against commitment, one form of education involves communal focus on those Christian practices that resists such way: Sabbath practices and contemplative walking or prayer come to mind.

-In clinical training, therapists learn to “go with the resistance” like swimmers flowing with a rip tide instead of fighting against it. There may be wisdom and liberation in committing to work with and bless those who are participating when they are able to be present, and worrying less about how to get them to be present more fully and more often.

-Maria Harris once wrote that the church doesn't *have* a curriculum; the church *is* a curriculum. We need to get Christian education out of cloistered spaces and into kitchens, sanctuaries, mission planning sessions, choir practices, soup kitchens, work places, etc. Reflective apprenticeship in practices already taking place in the life of the congregation (internally and as the Body of Christ in the world) forms people in faith without requiring them to commit to one more class.

There is much about contemporary lifestyles that makes us commitment-challenged or even commitment-averse, disabled in our capacities to de-center ourselves in love for others: with email and smart phones, people are virtually “always at work,” always accessible, and nearly always doing more than one thing at a time. We drive and talk on the phone and drink coffee while mentally composing a speech to the boss. We live under conditions of portability, mobility, disposability—all of which lend a sense of limitation to the notion of commitment, most of which bring a consumerist orientation rather than a relational and theological one as the frame within which to understand our actions grounded in love for another. Flexibility and the capacity to adapt to ever changing conditions become high virtues, ranking above “old fashioned” notions of fidelity, loyalty, constancy, or singleness of heart. In truth, both categories are needed for the present time of church life.

The past several decades in Christian education have seen some very creative responses to the task of educating in this commitment-challenged milieu. Adult education takes the shape of freestanding forum hours or short courses of 3-6 weeks. Children participate in workshop rotation classes that use different media such as drama, cooking, or art to explore the same scripture text for successive weeks. Adult teachers and children can participate without making a long term commitment to attendance. Such innovations/modifications make possible a level of engagement in Christian education in spite of the curtailment of commitment to sustained learning with others over time.

Even so, such models often leave some of us feeling restless, longing for the depth of learning and reflective integration that longer term engagements (say, a year with a group of adults and the ‘Christian Faith and Life’ curriculum) can allow. The danger here is one of nostalgia, a refusal to live in the time we’ve been given, brought on by being overly committed to a time that is past. The possibility is that our ways of teaching and learning may yet again be transformed for the needs of a new age, so that we can continue to grow in faith and love as a people of God reformed and always re-forming, being made new in Christ.

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