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CHAPTER VI

THE CHURCH AS TEACHING AGENCY

Loyal Martin

The church does not have an educational program, it *is* an educational program. The very nature of the church constrains it to be an educational organism.¹

Christ's command to the church is clarified in a series of verbs that have come to be known as the Great Commission. "As you go, *make disciples, baptize* these disciples, and *teach* them to do what I have taught you" (Matt. 28:19-20). Evangelism and nurture are then integrally related. Evangelism is bringing people to such knowledge and acceptance of Jesus Christ that they make a personal commitment to Him and nurture is helping them to grow in that relationship. No decision for Christ is made without preparation nor is it maintained without follow up for growth.²

Paul "made many disciples" at Lystra, returning later to strengthen the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith" (Acts 14: 21-22). Most of the letters written by Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude are for the primary purpose of edification. Gene Getz lists 137 passages from Acts through Revelation that either illustrate, urge, or fulfill one of these dual activities of evangelism or edification.³

Lawrence Richards argues that we can no longer think of "Christian education" as a *part* of the church's ministry expressed through "educational" (e.g., school) agencies.⁴ Instead, we need to begin to see the total life of the church, all the interactions of believers, as part and parcel of the Church's educational (discipling) ministry.

This does not mean that we can never meet together in a school setting, or for schooling. It does mean that we cannot

rely on schooling as *the* strategy in Christian education. It means that we need to develop a multi-strategy approach to Christian education.

Christians need to see that the nurturing process Jesus initiated by His example, and His command in Matthew 28:19, 20, does not necessarily imply a class or classroom setting. When the church begins to act on this it will be able to see more clearly the function of those activities that are classroom and schooling oriented and relate them to its total life as a nurturing, educational environment. The task of the church, then is winning and nurturing and that task encompasses its total life.

I. GOALS

If gaining disciples and nurturing them is the church's goal, how will the church know when it has finished its task? When has the church won its quota of people? When has it nurtured those people to maturity? Determining when "all nations" (Matt. 28:19, NASB), have been evangelized or even defining what "evangelized" means is not in the scope of this chapter. But a definition of the goals of nurturing will be attempted.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were carnal and immature (I Cor. 3:1), indicating there was a goal they had not yet reached. Hebrews 5:12 teaches that it is possible to revert from one plateau to a lower one in spiritual growth.

Every group has its pet list of beliefs or conduct that rank member's conformity to the group. Consciously or not, a person applies a measure on someone else's maturity when he approves or disapproves of his conduct, attitudes or beliefs. Standards of measurement may be built on family tradition, denominational distinctives, ethnic values or community standards. Too often the standards derived from such sources become a norm for exclusiveness and judging. Sometimes community norms or ethnic values are reinforced by Scripture rather than judged by it. This builds legalism and pharasaical attitudes. Community norms are applied as external measures of worldliness, spirituality and maturity rather than biblical norms of heart attitudes.

Measures of maturity as goal statements about the Christian life must always be derived first from Scripture.

But even among those who seek to describe spiritual maturity from a biblical base, measures of maturity vary. Gene Getz focuses on Paul's repetition of faith, hope and love.⁵ Andre Bustanoby has developed an entire Spiritual Inventory Battery based on knowledge of Scripture, independent study of and personal interaction with Scripture and the ability to apply Scripture to practical Christian living.⁶ His determination of maturity or lack of it can only be accepted if one accepts his premises.

The Bible speaks of both ultimate, that is, eternal goals and temporal or mediate goals for the believer.

A. *Ultimate Goals.* A biblical statement of the goal of Christian education is *likeness to Jesus Christ* (Col. 1:28). Jesus said that a disciple that is "fully taught will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40; Matt. 10:25). "Those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). Paul says the ministry gifts were given "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13). Paul seems to strain at such lofty statements to preclude anyone claiming or even thinking he has attained it. Christ plans to present the corporate body of believers, the church, to the Father "having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:27). And Jude asserts that Christ is able to accomplish that (Jude 24-25).

B. *Mediate Goals.* But despite the impossible nature of those eventual goals for this life, the Bible consistently holds up patterns which are expected of God's children, even before they reach perfection in eternity. The believer's anticipation of perfect likeness is stirred both by God's patience with his imperfections and by God's desire that he move toward attainment in this life. "In this is love perfected with us that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world" (I Jn. 4:17). "We shall be like him. . ." (I Jn. 3:2). "So we shall bear the likeness of the man from heaven" (I Cor. 15:49).

Several catalogs of Christian virtues become goal statements for the believer (Col. 3:12-17; II Peter 1:5-7; Phil. 2:1; 4:8-9). The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) is the list of graces God's Spirit is at work building in the believer. That these goals are attainable is evidenced in the lives of individual believers whom many admire. One person is stable, not blown away by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14). Another delights his spiritual mentors by his growth and progress (II Peter 3:18; James 1:2-3). One demonstrates the grace of well chosen words, kindness and an affirming spirit. Another demonstrates insightfulness in sensing error.

No Christian is always Christlike. How do believers then call others to be what they have not yet attained? They do it by sharing both their failures and victories in becoming Christlike. This requires a functioning body or "body life" as some have called it. The very nature of the body of Christ makes it essential for every member to function and contribute to the process of edification.⁷ Christian education is concerned as much with the *process* of change as with the *content* of knowledge upon which such change is built. Measuring learning outcomes in terms of the growth of the individual believer and the body toward Christlikeness is difficult. But it does not keep them from the effort toward such likeness "in understanding of life, in attitude, in values, in emotion, in commitment." Communicating that life in Christ demands sharing with one another of all that they are: success and failure, so that through such sharing growth toward Christlikeness may take place.⁸

Fellow believers stir each other to good works (Heb. 10:24). They build each other up (Rom 14:19), admonish and care for one another (Rom 15:14; Col. 3:16; I Cor. 12:25),. They confess their sins to each other (James 5:16) and love one another (I John 1:7; 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; I Thess. 3:12; 4:9).

II. DIVINE RESOURCES

In the struggle to move toward its goals the church must keep in mind that God initiated the process. Man is not searching for God nor did the notion of Christlikeness originate with the church. God is concerned with and has

provided for the growth in grace of those who have become His children through faith in Christ.

The Word of God (I Peter 2:2) is God's first and obvious provision to communicate His likeness to believers today. It is therefore the foundation for the believer's study and teaching in personal as well as corporate efforts toward maturity in Christ.

Through prayer God is freed to act in instruction, guidance and understanding of His will for the believer (Ps. 5:8; 86:11).

Beyond that is the direct and personal ministry of both Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ indwells the disciple empowering for service and motivating for right living (II Peter 1:4; John 17:21, 23). Christ works to see His redemption brought to completion (Phil. 1:6). The Holy Spirit also indwells the believers (I Cor. 3:16; 6:19) and teaches them (John 14:26).

III. HUMAN AGENCIES AND METHODS

The church is a teaching agency both by what it does and how it does it, planned or unplanned. This goes on whether the church likes the things it teaches or not.

A building with centered pulpit, communion table in front of it and choir behind it communicates something quite different from one with a split chancel or one with pulpit elevated high above the altar and entered via steep winding staircase. Pews in rows or chairs in circles tell something about what is valued and about the methods being utilized in the particular teaching setting. Pipe-organ or tambourine each model what the group that uses them feels is appropriate. The care given to the premises and the punctuality of service each communicate values held by the body involved. The efficiency of the ushers, the preparation given to the pastor's sermons and the kinds of humor used in the hallways all teach that these are the accepted—and therefore, presumably, right and good—ways to do things.

It is obvious in all this that all of life becomes a school and the church competes with the school, community practices, influential peer groups and the media for a share of

people's attention in order to teach facts, values and change conduct.

The home as God's teaching agency is treated in another chapter in this book. The necessity of a nurturing body of believers has already been pointed out.

A. Agencies

Numerous agencies specializing in various forms of nurture have arisen in the last 200 years of church history. All of these have performed an admirable and useful function. Some have lapsed into tradition-bound patterns that no longer seem relevant. But human innovation has usually created new agencies to meet the felt needs even if the old agency would not allow itself to be replaced.

The Sunday school is hardly recognizable as the 200 year old offspring of Robert Raikes' efforts with street urchins in England. It has become a central institution in the church's nurturing efforts and is no longer a movement. It has become big business. It both supports a huge publishing industry and, by some estimates, involves more volunteer workers than any other agency, religious or secular. At the same time it has become a by-word for meaningless activity. To call something "Sunday-school" is to label it unworthy of serious attention.

Vacation Bible schools originated at the turn of this century and have also evolved into many shapes. Bible study and evangelistic appeal to children have been the hallmark of VBS. For a time it replaced evangelistic meetings as the most likely agency of conversion for Mennonite Brethren children.⁹

Camping was a way of life on the American frontier but became an activity the church used for spiritual enrichment beginning with the late 1800's. Camping, too, has become big business. Many campgrounds now operate programs year round. Some churches dismiss Sunday services and encourage the entire body to gather at an appropriate site for a weekend retreat. Camps are conducted for families, fathers and sons, women, singles, every age group, motorcyclists, fishermen, policemen, writers or Christian educators.

Released Time weekly Bible study was first tried in 1941. Children were given time during public school hours

to study the Bible. Usually this had to be in a site off-campus and conducted by non-school personnel.

Clubs for boys and girls modelled after the scouting programs were developed in the late 1930's. These have become means for reaching non-churched homes for some churches. Such activity oriented programs could only succeed when children were no longer busy with farm chores or in the "sweat shops" of city industry.

The revival of small group Bible studies in recent decades has met a need for fellowship, informal nurture and personal involvement for adults that Sunday school and other agencies were somehow overlooking. The discipline involved in the study program developed by an organization like Bible Study Fellowship demonstrates that adults are still willing to study if challenged. There is perhaps not an hour of the day or night of any week when there is not a Bible study going on somewhere in North America.

Such para-church agencies as Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ and Navigators have each arisen to meet a particular need. But they have also spawned entire organizations that sometimes rival the local church in finances and effectiveness.

Perhaps the fastest growing agency for training today is the Christian Day School. Twelve regional associations of such schools existed across the United States by Fall, 1979.

B. Methods.

It has already been argued that Christian education is far more than the usual classroom setting. Methods appropriate only to the classroom are, therefore, also inadequate to the total nurturing ministry of the church. That is not to say that classroom settings and methods should not be employed. But the church must never think it has completed its task even when it has done admirably in the Sunday school class or other church-site oriented programs. Those in charge of the Christian education department in local churches know that doing admirably even in the classroom setting is no easy task. Finding willing workers, providing adequate resources and training workers are a major undertaking. Overcoming distractions of the occasion

or poor location, inadequate facilities and motivating learners are real challenges. Perhaps, because just doing well in the setting is such a challenge local church educators have tended to focus mostly on that setting. Why take on the total life situation where total nurture takes place when accomplishing more than average results just in the classroom is already difficult? When there are already a multitude of tools and methods for the classroom, why take on a task for which the settings, tools and techniques have to be tested?

But organized efforts to diversify the nurturing energies of the church are being made. Curriculum materials to aid the church in building the family are available. Some churches schedule marriage enrichment weekends or parenting seminars. Some churches are providing professional counseling to help families and persons in need. Some churches are clearing their calendar of all meetings for one night a week so that the family will not be torn by competing expectations and given the opportunity to be together on that night. At least one Mennonite Brethren district conference accepted its Christian Education Board's strong urging that Monday evening be set aside for family home evening. A manual for use by families is planned. But getting even a majority of the churches to implement this program will be difficult. And the temptation for families will be to take on other activities away from home once the church has cleared a night. And even if a family stays at home, will the time be utilized to build relationships and do constructive things together?

Another attempt at helping the family to nurture has been Sunday School Plus.¹⁰ Lawrence Richards' curriculum provides a link between Sunday school and home by specifying weekly home activities for parents and children based on the study topic of the week. Great stress is placed on modelling by both the children's teachers and the parents. Instruction and reinforcement for the parents' efforts is provided in their Sunday school classes as they study the same topics their children do and plan for the week's home activities. But the commitment required to keep the program operating has discouraged many. Sales of the materials lagged and Richards' publisher quit in 1979.

At this writing in 1980 the material is again available and a Vacation Bible School unit has been added.

In spite of the difficulties, such returns to a family emphasis is a move in the right direction.

Churches have experimented with variations on the vacation church school idea. Some provide a series of day camps for various ages. Others conduct the sessions in backyards in order to help families identify with their neighbors in outreach and model family concern for the community. Still others schedule evening vacation schools for the entire family. Sessions ranging from cake decorating to motor tune-up are offered so persons can interact in whole life situations rather than only in formalized Bible study.

Discipleship as a program has come into vogue in recent years. For some it is little more than a new name for old programs. But as an effort to purposefully nurture individuals toward personally tailored goals of maturity, the discipleship movement must be lauded. "Discipling is defined in the commission as (a) introducing people to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and (b) reproducing Christian lifestyle in them by teaching them to observe (do/practice/live) all the teachings of Jesus"¹¹ In Jesus' example discipling was living together in such close interaction and relationship that the disciples absorbed His way of doing things, His attitudes as well as learning the facts He taught them. Codified into a program by such para-church agencies as Navigators and Campus Crusade, disciple building concepts have been adapted to many settings. Pastors and church leaders are meeting regularly for prayer, Bible study, personal sharing and exhorting each other to grow in grace. This, in turn, is being multiplied as these leaders repeat the process with their disciples. The success of discipling in moving persons toward Christlikeness depends, of course, on the maturity of the discipler and the willingness of the disciple. Jesus spent three years with His twelve and was not always successful in having them absorb all He modelled and spoke.

Even in the classroom oriented efforts at nurturing the local church can offer more and better opportunities for growth. As it is, there usually is little correlation between the teaching efforts in the Sunday school hour, the morning

sermons, the Sunday evening service and midweek activities (adult Bible study, children's clubs, youth group meetings). If a local church coordinated its efforts toward well defined goals of knowledge, to say nothing about attitude and conduct, it could offer the equivalent in time of a three year Bible Institute training in eight years of church services. A three year Bible Institute program totals from 1200-1500 hours of classes. Sunday school, morning and evening services and midweek activities total at least four hours per week or 200 hours in a 50 week year. Eight years of this church input equals three years of Bible Institute. This, of course, ignores the lifestyle learnings that occur in dormitories and school activities. But the local church also has picnics, family gatherings, potlucks and weekend retreats.

IV. TRENDS AND PROBLEMS

One trend of the 70's that will likely accelerate in the 80's in Mennonite Brethren churches is the employment of associate ministers for education, youth, music and evangelism work. Their ability to coordinate efforts should provide more intense nurturing capabilities in the church. But it may be they are only replacing the energies of volunteers who are not as readily available. More men are holding down extra part time jobs and more women are working. Rather than give time to the church they give money to hire a professional. In the process they model to children and neighbors that involvement in the church can be substituted by money.

Over the years churches have moved to graded Sunday schools, worship services, mid-week activities and choirs. Some large churches organize the entire educational ministry horizontally, that is, Early Childhood division, Children's division, Youth division, Adult division and Senior Citizens division. To be sure, attention to the age characteristics of children, youth and adults promotes learnings. But the increasing separation of age groups in the church exacerbates a loss already occurring because the extended family no longer lives together. Persons across the age spectrum are seldom involved with each other. They

cannot learn from or care for each other. New experiments in intergenerational learning settings are in progress. Skeptics may well argue that with this the church has come full circle, back to ungraded systems.

New technology available, such as video tape recorders, closed circuit television, video phones, satellite broadcasting relays could be harnessed to the ministry of the church. But will their use help or hinder? The cold impersonalism of these tools militates against a vital element in the nurturing process. People respond to personal attention. Discipling involves modelling and that is best done in person. So technology must be coupled with personal ministry for a balanced result.

One of the most vexing problems of the educational ministry of the local church is the lack of clear goals. Workers, and sometimes leaders, assume that everyone knows what Sunday school or a club program is all about and where it fits into the total church program. Such assumptions are faulty and lead to frustration. Each local church has a particular personality. Each has its own locale and needs. No denominational office can determine the best program or methods to use in a local setting. These must be determined by those involved. Church leadership must help the church determine needs, set goals, interpret them to the body of believers and insist on accountability by each agency to meet these goals. When goals are not clear the first result is confusion. The Sunday school operates independently of other nurturing efforts. Individual teachers within the Sunday school order their own materials based on their own goals and determinants. Little thought is given to duplication or omission from agency to agency. Whole areas of content or need are omitted. New programs are undertaken to cover these areas of lack. As programs and agencies proliferate competition for talent, time and budget saps the energies of the church. Eventually a goalless climate of anomie results. "The aimlessness, confusion, low level of energy and involvement in these congregations that are not achievement oriented affects every aspect of congregational life. . . ." ¹² The solution is the hard work of determining needs, setting goals and moving aggressively to keep the energies of a local body focused toward those goals.

V. BALANCING THE PROGRAM

One church sees its goals as "win, teach, train and send." Another keeps before its people the goals of evangelism and discipleship. Both of these follow an assertion earlier in this chapter that evangelism and nurture are integrally related.

There is a three way emphasis that can be seen from a study of the New Testament. 1) There is an emphasis on the church scattered for witness and service (Matt. 28:19-20; II Cor. 5:20; Acts 8:4; 11:19). 2) Another emphasis is on the church gathered for fellowship, nurture, correction and sharing (Acts 2:46; Gal. 6:2, 5; Eph. 5:19; I Pet. 4:9; I Jn. 4:7). Then there is an emphasis on the church gathered to teach and build foundations for belief (Matt 28:19-20; I Tim. 3:2; 4:13; II Tim. 2:2; 3:16).

Illustrations of what happens when a local church follows one of these emphases to the exclusion of the others could be multiplied. The following chart shows some results from such unbalance.¹³

Focus on	with	Neglect of	Results in
Evangelism		Doctrine Fellowship	Shallow preaching, false doctrine. Circus-like gimmicks to attract people. No real life change or depth of discipleship. People won but leave.
Doctrine		Evangelism Fellowship	Cold, arrogant, academics. Evangelical gnosticism. Proud of truth correctly stated and held without regard for persons. Isolation. Splinter groups.
Fellowship		Doctrine Evangelism	Pooled ignorance, emphasis on emotions. No depth of life-style or basis for life change. Splinter groups.

Doctrine = Bible teaching, building doctrinal foundations

Evangelism = Witnessing, winning, serving, outreach beyond the body

Fellowship = Nurture, correction, sharing, admonition.

How are these biblical goals to be developed in a particular local setting? Numerous tools for guiding the process of goal setting are available and only a cursory review of the steps can be given here. Questions to trigger the need assessment and goal setting might include some of the following. How many new people is the church attracting per year? How many is it losing through transfer, disinterest? How knowledgeable are the people it is attracting in biblical truth? How mature are they? What areas of Bible knowledge do people in Junior High, or young adult departments lack? What programs have been operated and for how long? What special social or spiritual or physical needs have been overlooked in the body? How well staffed are the programs that are in use? Are the goals of each agency clear? Are they related to other programs? What human, financial and facility resources does the church have? What percentage of the group is involved in at least one activity in the church? How many have 2, 3 or more positions? What attitudes toward learning and Christian growth are there in the church?

Having asked all these questions and drawn a fairly comprehensive picture of need and resource, the church should then move to balance its efforts in the direction of greatest need. But that new effort should not be allowed to subvert the entire energy of the church for a long period or else it will once more become unbalanced in its total program.

A rural church might discover that, while the population is sparse and generally churched, isolated families with children having learning disabilities are open to the caring attention of a few persons. So, one or two families from the church could learn how to tutor children with disabilities. By offering such help and getting involved with the total family, these persons could be won, nurtured and matured.

In the process they could get involved in the church programs already being offered.

An inner city church might determine that it should supplement the flashy TV preaching and entertainment diet of its sporadic attenders with home Bible studies. Low key preaching ministries with a cadre of home teacher-visitors might balance the program for these people and gain greater faithfulness or contribution of energy from them.

A suburban church might find that it has several professional groups that need challenging opportunities. They could develop seminars on topics ranging from work and leisure to middle age crisis to parenting. These would become the basis for nurturing needy persons and getting them involved in more traditional programs of the church.

CONCLUSION

The local church cannot choose whether it will be a teaching agency. It teaches by all that it does. It can only choose how it will teach, what areas of teaching will be given priority and what energies it will focus on its teaching ministry.

NOTES

- 1 Allen W. Graves, "Administration of the Christian Education Program," *Foundations for Christian Education in an Era of Change*, Marvin J. Taylor, ed., (Abingdon, 1976), p. 107.
- 2 James F. Engle and H. Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest?* (Zondervan, 1975), p. 45.
- 3 Gene Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*. (Moody, 1974), pp. 24-27.
- 4 Lawrence O. Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education* (Zondervan, 1975), pp. 119.
- 5 Getz, pp. 54-61.
- 6 Andre Bustanoby, "Testing for Maturity," *Christianity Today* (November 21, 1969), pp. 22-23.
- 7 Getz, p. 116.
- 8 Richards, pp. 21-22, 34.
- 9 Gerry Ediger, "A Compilation of Evangelism Surveys," an unpublished research paper presented at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, May, 1979.
- 10 Larry Richards, "Why Sunday School Plus?" *Direction* (January, 1977), pp. 21-23. Materials are available from Dynamic Church Ministries, Box 35331, Phoenix, Arizona 85069.
- 11 Bob Girard, "Jesus Models Discipling" *Interchange*, (Fall, 1979), p. 1.
- 12 Robert C. Worley, "Church Education as an Organization Phenomenon," *Foundations for Christian Education in an Era of Change* (Marvin J. Taylor, ed. Abingdon, 1976), p. 124.
- 13 Adapted from a 1974 chart developed by the author and from Gene Getz, *Measure of a Church* (Gospel Light, 1975), pp. 152-53.

Additional Helpful Materials

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