

Episode One

Introducing Faith Formation and Christian Education

Jonathan Sargeant

Hello and welcome to Faith Formation Essentials, a short course in which we explore how to tell the Christian story in super effective ways. We're operating from the assumption that learning about the story is brilliant but learning how to tell the story is life-giving and, well, essential!

There will be various things underpinning this short course, but we'll get to them as we go along.

One thing I do want to make very clear, right here from the outset, is that this course is not just for teachers in classrooms or children's church scenarios, although it is for you too. This course is for anyone who leads a group, is part of a group, wants to start a group. But it's also not just about groups!

This course is for anyone who wants to understand their faith, their OWN faith better. This course is for anyone who wants to understand communication better. This course is for anyone who wants to explore living an authentic Christian life, taking their faith seriously, with all the fun and challenge that entails. Sound like you? It is!

If you understand your own faith, your own Christian story and understand how humans communicate with each other, you'll also understand how best to live that life in the midst of all the other people on the planet and especially within your own faith community.

So this sounds like a win-win situation right? Maybe with all that's just been said, a win-win-win-win situation?

Now to doing this course. There are six episodes, and we feel it's useful to do them in the order specified. There's a kind of flow, a sequence which means each builds on the foundations laid in previous episodes. We'll start with big ideas and always drill down to the specifics of your own situation using the workbook activities along the way. There'll be reflection and thinking for you to do; you are not the audience, you are participants, in the best spirit of how learning works.

In fact, we'll try to structure things so that the principles and ideas we talk about will also be enacted in the work we do together in this course. So you'll learn from the WAY we are doing things, as well as the content itself. That's what we hope anyway!

Look beside this video and you'll find a workbook that you can download. You can print it out or use it digitally, jotting down any reflections on separate paper... Anyway, got it already? If you haven't pause me now and download it.



Bruce Boase

Maybe you're doing this short course on your own or maybe in a group. If you're on your own, go well! It's a good idea to talk over some of your learnings with others involved in ministry, even if it's just casually in the staffroom or after church during morning tea.

If you're working with a group there'll be time to process your learnings in that group setting. The good thing is that you'll be able to learn from other members of your group as well. We learn more when we learn together! That's definitely true!

As we go, you might encounter words that are new to you. I'd suggest jotting them down in the back of your book. Then you can follow up on them with your group if you have one, or do a little research, or even ask someone you trust in this faith formation area. There is a lot to learn!

Two more things it's good to do? Acknowledge country and pray to start.

Let's acknowledge country first. Know the name of the local mob where you are? You can include their name in this text as you go. If you don't know them, it would be a great step to find out and make contact!

Anyway, here's one from NSW First Nations poet Jonathan Hill...

*Today we stand in footsteps millennia old.
We acknowledge the traditional custodians
whose cultures and customs have nurtured
and continue to nurture this land
since all of us awoke from the great dream.
We honour the presence of our ancestors
who reside in the imagination of this land,
and whose irrepressible spirituality flows through all creation.*

Adding in,

we commit ourselves to Reconciliation

and respectfully recognise that sovereignty has never been ceded.



And now let's pray. Can we say this together? The words are in your workbook, but you'll see them on the screen as well.

Searching God,

to you no one is lost.

No one is left behind.

No one is the price to be paid for the greater good.

Give us the same restless desire,

the same fierce joy

which finds grace in every child of earth

and makes a community open to all.

We ask this in the name of Jesus

who loves the world and did not count the cost.

Amen

Jonathan Sargeant

Thanks Fr Bruce! Ok, Are we ready? Time to dive further in!

Christian Education. Christian. Education. I say that term and you probably have a few things come to mind. Maybe particular kinds of programs. Maybe something you've experienced before. Sometimes in this sphere you hear the term Faith Formation. That can be thought of in similar ways, though it might bring some OTHER things to mind.

Ok, so let's make a list. Use the spot in the workbook to make a list of all the kinds of things you'd call Christian Education or Faith Formation. It doesn't have to be 2 separate lists. Maybe they're things happening in your own context, or just other stuff you've heard of that comes to mind. Got an idea what I'm talking about? Ok, pause the video, find the page shown on the screen and have a go for 3 or 4 minutes.

"What comes to mind when you hear the terms Christian education or Faith formation? Make a list of things that could fit under those terms...ideas from your own experience, or things you've heard about from other contexts."

Ok, how'd you go? I made a bit of a list too. Maybe you listed things like religious instruction or education in schools. Maybe Sunday school or Children's church, depending on the term you're used to. Maybe you listed Bible study or cell groups.



Maybe chapel or other church services were on your list since we definitely learn as we take part in a eucharist or other worship experience. Worship is a good example of how learning is not only about intentional “lessons”. We also learn from HOW things are done: when to stand up or sit down, but even what clothes might be appropriate, social hierarchies and the like. This is about culture and there’s lots of learning in that way. It’s good to recognise that!

Vanessa Gamack

Now it’s possible you made a big list. The things we are talking about now: Lenten studies, baptismal preparation, confirmation classes, all of these kinds of things are programs for Christian Education and Faith Formation. They are all ways of putting Christian Education and Faith Formation into action. Would you consider some of them more Christian Education than Faith Formation? And some more Faith Formation than Christian Education? You might have an intuitive sense of how those two terms are different. We’ll focus in on that next episode, but for now...

What about the terms themselves? Maybe we’ve never thought about definitions for those terms. Let’s think about them for a bit because it helps you to focus in on what we’re really doing. It helps us establish the boundaries of our work together.

Have a look at these definitions collated from various sources. The task is simple. Look for definitions (or at least bits of them) that appeal to your sense of how Christian Education should be. Note shared ideas/words/concerns amongst them. Any words pop up more than once here and there?

Underline any terms you’re not familiar with? That’s okay! We’re all learning! Jot these down in your workbook. Do any of the definitions prompt a question or two for you? Note these as well.

Okay that was a lot of definitions! Which ones stood out to you? Did you see some things in common with some of them?

You might have noticed that ministry was mentioned a lot. We’re clearly in the business as Christians of working to do something intentional. Learning and teaching are mentioned a bit, too. Therefore, we know Christian Education and faith formation are about a particular kind of relationship between people. The students seem to be at the center of that process. The focus in most definitions is towards God through Jesus. The word transformation or transformative is mentioned a few times. We know that’s what Jesus is all about. You might have



noticed the term 'practices' coming up here and there. One emphasis in the last couple of decades is that Christian Education and faith formation is not just about learning particular facts. It is also about developing a set of life-giving practices that shape us to love God and each other more.

We'll come back to this later, but the cool thing here is that we can learn to do these practices, like prayer and hospitality. The practices themselves also teach us and form us in God's love! They are definitely a two-way street!

Fiona Hammond

You might also have noticed that some definitions seemed to point to activities in schools and some sounded more parish-based, or out in the community. It's important to note that the context in which we do Christian Education and faith formation makes a big difference, both to the aim of the teaching and learning but also to the way in which we do it.

Karen Tye, in her wonderful book 'Basics of Christian Education', suggests one structure for Christian Education and Faith Formation. She suggests there are four types or aims and that any working process of ministry in this sphere has a greater or lesser emphasis on each. Some might have more of 1, some more of 3 and less of 2. This will make more sense if we actually look briefly at each one!

The first type of Christian Education we can talk about is religious Instruction. Now confusingly we also use that term to talk about a certain kind of Christian Education that happens in our government schools, but in this case, we're not talking about that. In the Religious Instruction type we're talking about deliberate and intentional efforts by the church to transmit the knowledge and practices of the Christian faith. The mode of teaching in this type is instruction, as the name suggests.

Now instruction suggests a particular way of doing teaching. Imagine you get a new flatpack bookshelf from a Scandinavian furniture shop. You open up the box and there are a zillion bits and pieces. To put it all together, you need? The instructions! They give you a guided, precise, step by step process for assembling the bookcase so it will look exactly like the one you saw on display in the shop. That's helpful for making a bookshelf. The process of teaching is that the instructions know how to do it and if you follow them, you will get it done. There's no consultation, or room for you to go in a different direction. You follow the instructions. So one type of CE is like this. Instruction teaches us particular things. Some see this as a kind of 'conserving the faith' sort of thing. Follow the instructions and you get a kind of faith like it says on the box! This is good for



doctrine. You could call this a kind of 'indoctrination', which is what instruction to absorb doctrine is all about.

Bruce Boase

The second type of Christian Education and Faith Formation is what we call a socialisation process. Socialisation uses the word 'social' so we know we're talking about something that involves learning in community. Socialisation is about enculturation, in other words soaking up culture. The culture of the church can refer to things like learning when to stand up, when to sit down, who does what, when to sing, how to pray together and so on. The church culture might be one of deep care for the community, with programs for feeding the homeless and giving them shelter. In a socialisation process the enculturation is done by the community of faith. Within this type of Christian Education we see a focus on nurturing individuals to learn how to be church together. You might even think of this as a kind of habit formation. Authors like Westerhoff and James Fowler have talked a lot about this.

The third type is called the personal development approach. There's an emphasis here on the individual growing through a series of stages to improve themselves as people, in terms of say, character formation and moral development. This kind of Christian Education can happen in groups, cell groups or Bible study groups, but the emphasis tends to be more on the individual learning through particular curriculum material, rather than communal education.

Vanessa Gameck

The final type in this four-part schema is Christian Education as a process of liberation. Whilst other types focus more on maintenance of the church, to keep it going as it is, Liberation is transformation in the communal sense. So there's a focus on critical thinking and imagining how God might prefer things to be to meet the challenges of the future. In this way Christian Education as liberation is about a prophetic activity (in the same mould as the Old Testament prophets), transforming the church to challenge oppression, both internally and externally.

So there you have it: Religious instruction, socialisation process, personal development and the work of liberation. The idea is that any approach to Christian Education has more or less of some or all of these four types. How do you see what happens in your context shaping up with that? Can you see the emphases on some



or all of these in your context? Do you wish there was a greater component of any of these types in your own context? I think Tye's work is helpful in thinking about these kinds of questions.

Fiona Hammond

Let's turn now to some of our own experiences in this world of teaching and learning. One thing's for sure, we've all had experiences! It's time for a little bit of memory work now. Each of us have been taught by an array of different teachers in the past. These might have been at school, or maybe in your church life, or maybe even in the workplace at some stage. So many people help us to learn and grow.

Can you think of one teacher who stands out to you – who particularly inspired or helped you to learn? When you think of good teachers, who is that one stand-out teacher or maybe one of many? Once you have thought of that person, identify a thing or two about how they taught that has earned them the title of "Good Teacher" from you?

Pause the video now to give yourself a moment or two to think. You can jot down your ideas in the appropriate place in the workbook.

How did you go? Maybe the person you thought of played a role in you being involved in teaching in some way.

Maybe they helped you in your growth as a Christian. How about the things about them, their style, that meant you chose them. Do these things provide a positive example for you to follow?

Just as we chose a good teacher in that activity, we probably just as easily could have remembered some experiences of less than stellar teaching. We're not going to dredge up that stuff specifically, but I do just want to mention this.

When we focus on teaching and learning as we're doing in this course, it's possible that our prior experiences shape this a little. Those experiences can be the lens through which we see all of this. Now that can be okay if we had lots of good experiences.

Be aware of yourself, too! Be aware of your reactions to the material we'll work on. Be aware of the experiences you've had and the role they play as we learn together. Doing so will help you understand how YOU learn. Doing so will help you understand what it is like for others as they try to learn things.



That ability to step outside ourselves and be a bit self-aware is a useful skill, not just for this work, but for life, I reckon!

Jonathan Sargeant

Now whilst we're in this vicinity of thinking about memories and learning, another thing... Just as we can be inspired by former (or maybe even present) teachers, another factor comes into play. Let's look at it like this. One way to get our heads around the teaching learning process is to think a bit about the shape of classrooms themselves. Even if your present context is NOT in a classroom, there's a reason to do this, so stay with us. Think for a moment about school classrooms of the past. Think of their layout, the way furniture was arranged and how we sat. What do you think of? When I ask this question, depending on your age, many people will have a picture in their heads like this one.

How are the desks arranged? In rows. Where is the focus of the room? The front! Why? Because that's where the chalkboard and the teacher are.

We can work out a few things about how education was by looking at these indicators.

Desks in rows facing the front tells us what kind of relationships happen in this room. The primary relationship is one student with the teacher. That is how learning happens in this kind of classroom. And the style of learning is based on an understanding of the student as *tabula rasa*, a latin term which means blank slate. In other words the mind of the student is a blank slate just waiting to be filled with text from the teacher. The teacher has all the knowledge, the student has none, they are blank. And the student learns best one on one. For many centuries this was how learning was seen.

Ok, now think of a present day classroom, the shape of it, how the furniture is arranged. Far more often these days, especially in classrooms with younger students, the layout is different to what we just been talking about.

How are the desks mostly? In groups. Where does the teacher do their work from? Sometimes the front, sometimes the side, sometimes amongst the desks.

There has been a shift in education in the last century. Teaching and learning has moved away from the idea that students are blank slates. We've moved away from the idea that only the teacher has all of the useful knowledge.

Now we sit students in groups because research shows that students learn best together. Students learn from the teacher, yes, but also from their fellow students.



The relationships in the classroom involve all who are present, not just student-teacher. Also, the students themselves almost always have some prior knowledge that can be used as a foundation for new learning.

We'll explore these changes more in the episodes to come, but we wanted to bring this up from the start for a particular reason.

Remember we were talking about our previous experiences with teaching and learning? Those good teachers? Our previous experience can teach us in other ways, too. One thing that researchers tell us is that sometimes we can subconsciously think that the best way to teach is the way WE WERE TAUGHT.

Even if our previous experiences in those contexts was not always that great, when placed in situations where we need to teach, we can favour the model we were most exposed to, without even realising. So this is a little reminder to be aware of that.

Over the last few decades, there have been great movements, changes and breakthroughs in how people learn. In a short course like this we'll only have space to grapple with a few of those.

But if we are aware that there might be new and better ways to do some things, then maybe we'll be more open to those new ideas. What do you think? Can we still learn too? I think we can!

Ok, we've covered a lot in this first episode! In a way, we've been laying the foundations for where we'll head next. Next time around we'll think a little about the theology of top Christian education and faith formation. We'll think a little about the terms Christian education and faith formation; are they the same thing? And we'll look at one effective model for organising all that we want to teach when we're engaged in helping people's faith grow. Exciting! See you then.

