

Episode Two

Faith Formation and the Bible: why educate?

Fiona Hammond

Welcome to episode 2 of Faith Formation Essentials – a course designed to help you explore how to tell the Christian story in super effective ways. Last episode we laid some of the foundations for our journey into Christian Education and Faith formation together. So that's all done! (Haha)

In this episode we'll think a little about the terms Christian education and faith formation; are they the same thing? We'll develop the theology of effective Christian education. And we'll look at one useful model for organising all that we want to teach when we're engaged in helping people's faith grow.

There's one thing we should deal with first. During the first episode we used the terms Christian Education and faith formation often interchangeably. We grouped them together a lot too. What did you think about that? It certainly raises an important question: Are they the same thing? Can these two terms really be used interchangeably? Let's think about this a little.

Jonathan Sargeant

The term 'Christian Education' is one that's been around for a long time, well back into the 20th century. Historically, it's the term we used for all learning that goes on in the life of the church, whether it be parish based, in schools and elsewhere in the missional life of the church.

As we progressed to the end of the last century, people started to talk more about Faith formation, effectively describing the same things. In the talk about this you could pick up some reasons for the change.

There was thinking that Christian Education had become more associated with formal settings for learning, in schools and even Sunday schools and the like. Along with that came an understanding that formation described a more wholistic sense of being shaped by God in every aspect of our being. Schools and parishes were still involved in this definition, but very intentionally, family life was included as well.

Fiona Hammond

Because of this broader sense Faith Formation began to be used as a more modern way of thinking about how we learn about faith and how faith itself shapes us. There are other ideas too. Sometimes Faith Formation points to the idea that each individual takes initiative and action for their formation, whereas



sometimes Christian Education seemed more like something that was done to you, or for you, which is a nicer way of saying that!

Another common distinction is that Christian Education has become more something to do with education ABOUT faith, whereas Faith formation is more about education TOWARDS and IN faith. You see the difference there? That does describe two ways of thinking about learning and faith but I'm not convinced that our two terms Christian Education and Faith Formation actually describe those two things in a differentiated or contrasted sense. Realistically, authentic educational experience that involves head, heart and action will always be more than just learning 'about' faith. Faith changes you. Thinking about faith changes you.

Now a lot of this is just the way definitions for similar things change as the years go on. If you glance on the library shelves, you'll see more books these days talking about faith formation, and more of the older ones with the term Christian Education in their titles. So we'll continue to use them together and see if we can discern any more differences as we go. Sound okay?

Jeremy Greaves

Alright, let's move to thinking about some of the theological underpinnings for what we do in faith formation. As formers of faith, it's always good to operate knowing the foundations for what we do and how we do it. Fortunately, Christianity provides us with resources to do this. We have scripture, traditions and thinking of the church and our reason to use.

In a way we've already done some of this work. The definitions we looked at in episode one contain much of this. We only know a definition is a useful one because we have a sense of some of this theological thinking first. But let's look intentionally now at scripture to get some scenarios of effective teaching.

I'm a little resistant to the thinking that scripture contains hidden and direct information about every situation we can face in life but in the realm of teaching there is actually a lot of very overt material. We know Jesus was a wonderful teacher, or Rabbi as his disciples called him. Stories shared throughout the Gospels show a person with the ability to use words skilfully as he preached and shared. Jesus taught by example, through actions – he cared, welcomed, and loved all he came into contact with. He was a great teacher; hence the Gospels record crowds thronging to hear him as his ministry went on.

So let's look at a few passages, using an activity in the workbook. If you're in a group you can divide up the passages amongst you. If you're flying solo, feel free



just to choose a few at random and follow the instructions in the book. Pause the video now to have a go

Okay, well done! Now though, let's look in a different direction. Paul of Tarsus, or St Paul as we call him is also known as a very effective teacher. Let's look at a story often glossed over to get some more principles for effective teaching.

Here's the story, from the book of Acts. It's Acts 20:7-12. Have a listen to this:

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight.

There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer.

Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, 'Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.'

Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.

Sarah Plowman

Ok, lets check we understand what's going on.

Firstly, we hear Paul is in town on his perpetual speaking tour and is going to leave early the next day. Therefore, he wants to make use of the time so, as the story says, "he continued speaking until midnight". It goes on to mention a very un-Bible like detail. By that I mean our scripture as a text is a pretty stripped-down document. The authors always get to the point and never mention the décor of rooms where things happen. It's not like a film. Films always contain what we call "Establishing shots". You are shown a second or two of the outside of any house where a scene is going to happen inside, to get an idea of where a thing is happening. The Bible does not do this. So for this story to mention "many lamps" is unusual, which means it's important. Why mention many lamps? Because the room was smoky, maybe? Maybe the air was thick?

We also meet Eutychus, called a "young man". No-one is called a teenager in the Bible because that term didn't exist until the 2nd half of the last century. Eutychus though seems to be a teenager, a young man. And where is he? He is sitting on the windowsill.



There could be many reasons why he's there but it's easy for me to see this as a picture of the church, where young people have a history of being marginalised, pushed to the edges. I mean, maybe he was just being polite, letting adults have the best seats but it is what it is: He's on the edge of things in a potentially dangerous situation.

And Paul? Paul is talking on and on. Reading his letters, it's easy to imagine him talking in the same way: long sentences that require a lot of attention. Paul talks "still longer" and poor Eutyclus falls asleep. The picture of ministry here is not a good one! Paul preaches until people fall asleep! And not only that! You could say Paul's longwinded preaching actually causes the death of the teen Eutyclus! But don't worry: there's a happy ending! It's what Paul does in response that gives us some good ideas about good faith formation activity.

So what does Paul do? It's only two sentences but there's a lot packed in!

First, Paul "goes downstairs" to the young man. He leaves his comfort zone and goes to where Eutyclus is. If this is a picture of effective ministry, he doesn't expect the young people to come to him. He goes to where the young man is.

Secondly, Paul bends over him and takes him in his arms. Of course we're not going to be grabbing anyone in our 21st century ministry but let's imagine the scene. This is a first century street in Troas. Probably dirty and dusty, maybe animal manure, a pretty grubby place. But for Paul this is all about compassion for the young man. He knows that really caring can be messy and sometimes requires us to put ourselves out to get down in the dirt, so to speak. Teaching people and facilitating their faith formation is not done on our terms. It's done on theirs.

Next up Paul calls out 'Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him!' I imagine him calling out because surely there were some people still upstairs, looking down from the third floor window. What is Paul doing here? He is giving hope! Like every angel in scripture starting with "Do not be afraid", Paul says "Do not be alarmed!" For Paul, hope is central and I think that's a good principle for faith formation too. We must always operate with our Hope in Christ as central. Forming Faith should always leave people feeling hopeful. This is not about people feeling poorly or ashamed because they didn't know something. Hope is the way!

And Eutyclus is healed, alive. Paul goes upstairs and breaks bread, which is often code for sharing the eucharist with the community. So Paul rounds out this event making sure people are focussed on God and grateful to God for the miraculous happenings. We said hope is central but God is 'centraller'!



And then the story ends, with Paul not learning his lesson and talking on until dawn!! But Eutychus gets the last moment, taken away alive with people “not a little comforted”. More biblical understatement! Okay, so the series of lessons Paul provides for us for faith formation?

- Leave your comfort zone
- Be prepared to get a little dirty, focussing on the needs of the learner
- Provide hope and inspiration
- Always remind that God is central.

Sound okay?

Jeremy Greaves

There are many other stories that come to mind. One that I really love involves Jesus, but it’s more about how a person he interacts with responds to his teaching. I mean the teaching he does is pretty phenomenal too.

I’m talking about the conversation Jesus has with a woman, in the story we know as The Samaritan Woman at the Well. This story takes place in John chapter 4 and takes up most of it! It’s noon, it’s a hot day and Jesus asks a woman who comes by if he could have some water from the well. That Jesus talks to a woman in public is a big deal, breaking the gender rules of the day. That he chats with a Samaritan is also a big deal, since those tribal divisions were strong. Collecting water is a job for the cool of the morning or evening. That the woman comes by at the hottest time of the day also suggests that maybe she’s trying to avoid other woman coming to fill their jars.

What ensues is a loooooong conversation, over 20 or so verses. I think it’s the longest chat Jesus has with any one person recorded in the Bible. And it’s an amazing conversation too. Jesus chats, and asks questions. The woman tries careful answers, maybe evading the truth. Jesus doesn’t give up, uses lovely metaphors, gently keeping the to and fro going. And the woman slowly comes around, as Jesus does a ‘drop the mic’ moment, effectively confirming for her that he is the Messiah, the legendary revolutionary figure the Hebrew people had been waiting for. It’s worth a read, but it’s her reaction next that I want to point out.

Have a look at this, John 4:27-30:

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’

²⁸ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the



people, ²⁹'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

Some other stuff happens then we re-join this story at verse 39:

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

So this woman has had this amazing, unexpected interaction with Jesus. During it she has been trying to steer away from where Jesus was heading the conversation, but he brings her around in the end. And what is her reaction? She goes back to the city, leaving her water jar. This shows how rattled she was. She goes to the people who had probably judged her for moral reasons and can't help but say 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

She really becomes one of the first people to want to tell others about Jesus and from a teaching point of view, she starts with the facts. Then she asks a great question. In doing so she gives her 'students a real freedom': she doesn't tell them what to believe. She asks a question that draws them into checking out Jesus and making decisions about him for themselves. "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" So they invite Jesus to stay with them, he does for 2 days and many decide to believe and then the kicker: they say to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'" With a question, she drew them in to an educational situation where their own experience of Jesus taught them the truth: this guy is the Big One!

Alright, a lot in there. The key for us as people keenly interested in forming faith is the use of questions, both by Jesus during the long conversation and then by the woman in pointing to Jesus and respecting people enough to let them come to their own conclusions. It's not about clubbing people over the head with doctrine. But it might be about pointing to Jesus and enabling situations where people can experience God for themselves; where people can make up their own minds.



Jonathan Sargeant

There's a lot more that could be said about the theology which underpins Anglican approaches to growing faith. There's a lovely video, part of the Anglican Identity program, that highlights these issues for schools, though I think the principles it highlights can apply to all contexts, including right where you are! Just head to anglicanidentity.au

and have a look at episode 6.A. It's only 12 minutes. But not now though! We've got more to do!

So we're putting a lot of emphasis on the foundations of all the active stuff we do in faith formation. Getting those foundations right helps us to focus. Foundations help us to make effective choices about programs and help us make decisions when there are issues. The choices we make about Faith Formation are easier if we can refer to these reliable theological and practical foundations we're talking about. So let's talk about what model is the best to use to build those foundations.

In this case, I'm talking about a model to use to decide what content is important. How do we decide that? Imagine trying to make a list of all the things you think are important about Christianity that we should try to cover. You'd fill many white boards doing that! How would we decide what was in and what was out? How would we decide what the most important things were, the top priorities? I mean, we certainly could do that, with a few good minds and a bit of work. But the helpful thing is that smart minds have already done this thinking. As I said before, there are good models which describe exactly what we're talking about, to give shape to where we're heading.

Because, get this: if you have a good model that describes the key content to work with, then it helps you choose the best materials which target those things.

Fiona Hammond

Alright, models are important! That much is clear.

Let me tell you about one model, developed a few years ago, that helps here. In the past this has been known as the RECP model, for Religious Education Curriculum Project. That was a working group of clergy and other Faith Formation experts employed by the QLD education dept to take Religious Education very seriously. They developed this model and it was adopted by Catholic Education at the time who used it for their Religious Education curriculum program. I've even



heard Archbishop Phillip Aspinall enthuse about it to a group of Anglican RE teachers a few years back.

Anyway, enough with the history. Here's what it entails...

The RECP model is sometimes called the 3-circle model. I wonder why...

Hahaha. So there ARE 3 circles! This was a model created to be used in relation to ANY faith, but my examples will all be, of course, about the Christian faith.

Anyway let's look at each circle and see how they relate to each other and paint a useful picture helpful to our Faith Formation endeavours.

The first circle is called Traditional Belief Systems circle. This circle is all about how key doctrines and teaching are encapsulated. So this is the circle where you'd see Scripture placed. But note this: it's not JUST scripture. There is also all of the doctrinal elements that come to us from this faith tradition. So here you'd also place the creeds of Christian faith, like the Nicene Creed that people say in most services of worship. In that creed we list the things we believe as Christians, like God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit but also WHAT we believe about them and who they were and are, and more besides. So that's clearly about belief. This circle also contains the music that is treasured by Christians, as well as symbols too. There we're talking about the cross, of course but also the fish image used by early Christians to secretly communicate their membership in the church and so on. In this circle you'd find our distinctive language, which you might call 'jargon'. More on this important issue in another episode. In this circle you'd even find organisational structures, like the orders of Bishops, Priests, and deacons, and lay people as well. Even the idea of dioceses and parishes would be here.

So you can see this is a pretty big circle. It's important to spell that out a bit because in some parts of the church, they would see the name of that circle, traditional belief systems and say ok, 'the only thing we need in there is the Bible'. For Anglicans, the Bible is totally central and there's all this other rich tradition as well.

Sarah Plowman

Ok, that's Traditional Belief Systems. Next circle is the Shared Human Experience circle. Remember we're talking about a model for defining the content of what we should work on in faith formation endeavours. So this circle is all about the big life questions that people have wondered about for many centuries and still do today. Sometimes these are called Ultimate Concerns, or even unanswerable questions.



The latter label is not because these questions ARE unanswerable but because they generally can't be definitively answered for ALL people. Having said that, they ARE questions humans seem to be forever having a go at answering. So what are some of these?

These are questions like What does it mean to be human? Why do the innocent suffer? What is life for? Why did the world begin? Is there life after death? If there is a God, what is God like? How should we combat racism? And so on.

Shared Human Experience also contains moments that are common and that seem to inspire particular questions, such as experiences of wonder, awe, mystery or beauty. Think about holding a newborn baby or sitting above a headland watching crashing, majestic waves. It might be a moment during a eucharist service, or at a protest rally as you feel a collective purpose amongst a great crowd. Sitting in an immense cathedral or in your own humble garden. Why am I here? Who am I? What is truth? Collecting the questions and the experiences that inspire them is a job in itself!

So second circle: Shared Human Experience. In shorthand discussions, the first circle is sometimes called God talk. In that style THIS circle about human experience is called People Talk or WE talk, because these are things we muse about together.

Fiona Hammond

The last circle then is Individual Patterns of Belief. Here we are talking about the individuals in the context in which you might be doing faith formation. This is about the personal beliefs and sense of identity, the attitudes and experiences each participant brings to any scenario of learning. So if you are in a classroom there might be a lot to this one! Having said that any group will have much to draw on.

We are thinking specifically about Anglican expressions of Christianity, so this circle involves how people express that faith in their day to day lives. Through that expression, we can derive what they actually believe. Actions can speak louder than words!

This circle also brings to life discussions we have about what we call comprehensive Anglicanism. That is, an expression of Anglicanism that recognises the various threads of the church: the evangelical thread, the middle of the road thread, the Pentecostal thread, the Anglo-Catholic and progressive threads.

The challenge for Comprehensive Anglicanism is to allow space for each of these



voices to be heard while living for justice and respect. This concept really illustrates the stuff that is part of the Individual Patterns of Belief circle.

The contents of this circle will have us talking about beliefs and ideas sitting beside each other, and this makes certain demands of how we treat each other when we do so. This does mean we need special ways to talk about the range of ideas and beliefs that might be expressed here. How do we talk about different ideas, (especially ones that are deeply held) with people who might have quite different ideas? This is a super important issue in the 21st century, therefore we WILL come back to it in our last episode. So, 3 circles: Traditional Belief systems, shared human experience and individual patterns of belief.

Jonathan Sargeant

It is possible to use these 3 circles as a model for shaping the content of Christian education or faith formation. The idea is to consider how each might inform any learning experience you prepare for people you work with. Some 'lessons', to use that word, might have a greater emphasis on one circle than the others, but in the best of worlds we touch on each of these, especially over the course of any unit or program of work.

This is a model you can use to evaluate a new study book for your cell group, or a unit of work for your class, or even a book of reflections about the lectionary. For instance, if you detect the lack of one facet of the model, you might need to modify your material by adding some more of whatever IS lacking. I've even heard of some people writing sermons making sure they touch on all of the concerns in this model, in order to make sure their preaching is well rounded and complete.

One last thing to note: these are not static divisions of knowledge but a dynamic whole, each relating to and informing and shaping the others. You might even see how the especially Anglican ideas of Scripture, Tradition and Reason can be overlaid onto these three circles, but that's another whole thing for another short course!

So that's enough for this time. To summarise, we've talked about some of the element that underpin faith formation. We also thought a little about the terms Christian education and faith formation and saw how they can be used. And we outlined one model for educating about faith that helps us to ensure our work in this area is well rounded and includes a wholistic approach: that's the 3 circle model.



Feeling ok so far? I think we're doing well! Next time we'll get into ideas about learning itself. How do people learn? How do people learn MOST EASILY?? That's the key. We'll learn about learning and think about thinking. Too easy! You won't believe how intriguing the human mind is! See you then.

