

**THE ECOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP FORMATION:  
REFLECTIONS OF A LOCAL CHURCH EDUCATOR  
R. Ben Marshall**

The topic of the UMASCE 2005 Consultation is a critical one. However, during the designing process I began to get in touch with a sense of something missing from our consideration. That missing piece has to do with whether or not we can really assess the ecology of leadership formation without also considering the state of the ministry of Christian education itself. Therefore I want to share some reflections on the changes that have occurred in my tenure of ministry over the last 40 plus years that relate to the ecology of leadership formation but also to the state of Christian education and then share some hints about the future.

(Note: I will be using the term Christian education usually to refer to the past and present ministry of the church known by that name, the term nurture to refer to the overall task, and Christian or faith formation to refer to our present and hopefully future direction.)

**Changes in Leadership in Christian Education Since the 1960's**

1. Volunteer Training Structures

In the mid to late 60's I served on the conference Board of Education staff in North Texas. At that time there was still in place a leadership training course and laboratory school system established and managed by the general board and implemented by the annual conference. These systems had clear standards and accountability structures and gave me and many others a solid foundation in the teaching-learning theory and processes. They also contributed to an educated supply of lay persons who moved in to the further levels of training and into the ministry of Christian education. Even by the late 60's the leadership courses and lab schools were experiencing a down turn in attendance and today those structures do not exist at all for many different reasons all having to do in some way with the changing milieu surrounding Christian education in the church. Today there is very little to take the place of what I considered to be a very effective training system for its time. Today in our conference there are only some annual one day events for different age levels and some more intentional, but annual, events for youth workers. These events cannot possibly reach but a very small percentage of the volunteer teachers and leaders in our churches.

There are, of course, many training opportunities from the GBOD that support leaders for the various special courses such as Disciple Bible Study and educators in the various age groups. These are certainly available to the lay leadership, but they are not a viable source of training for the main force of church school teachers.

It is important to note that this vacuum of training within our denomination has made it necessary or attractive for our local churches to turn to the various para-church groups and resource providers for leadership support.

## 2. Beyond the Local Church Staff Support

A very important part of the leadership formation ecology as well as the support of the ministry of Christian education was and is the staff of the annual and general conference levels. In the mid 60's our Annual Conference Board of Education staff included four full-time persons supporting Christian education. Today there is only one person giving full time and one giving part time to the Christian education effort. There has been less in the past. The same situation applies at the general board level although it is hard to make comparisons with the different ways the agencies are structured. I do know there are fewer staff related specifically to youth ministry for instance, if not all of the age levels. Such a situation certainly has come about as a result of financial considerations, but the result has again been to affect the emphasis specifically upon Christian education.

## 3. Seminary and Certification

The readers of this paper in UMASCE will know this arena better than I , but for completeness I at least want to mention what I am concerned about. The MRE degree, as I have been told, is barely still in existence in our seminaries at the present. When I was in seminary in the early 60's there were many women in the MRE program that I could have dated (and did date one or two of them). Scaritt College which was such an important source of trained Christian educators is no more. The certification process for Christian education is still alive and well but I am not able to comment on any change in the number of persons participating, but it has to be less that it once was. Besides the resident programs at the seminaries, there is now at least one if not two programs I know of that have begun to use the internet as a means of making the courses more available.

It seems we need to evaluate the extent and content of the courses on Christian education taught in the seminaries for the MDiv degree. Also, many times such courses are not required for future pastors or may not be adequate for what they need which means they are ill prepared to guide their congregations in faith formation or even understand its importance to their ministry.

## **Issues Affecting the Ecology of Leadership Formation**

Behind the above mentioned changes and the state of Christian education today, there are some critical issues that I feel need to be mentioned as they affect the whole ecology of leadership formation. I will be making some generalizations that may sound extreme and to which there are many exceptions, but I express them this way to simply make a point.

### 1. The "Generalizing" of Ministry

With the move to a COM Structure in 1968, the reorganization of the general boards and the cut back in funding and resultant loss of staff support for Christian education at all levels, the view of Christian education as an important specialized ministry began its decline. This move to a more generalized and less "professionally categorized" ministry was a mixed blessing for the church, but a hard one for the visibility of Christian education. The MCE's and DCE's became

program directors and spread the description of their task even broader than it was and therefore thinner at points. This move also contributed, slowly but surely, to the lessening of the visibility of Christian education as an identifiable ministry that was more than just Sunday School.

## 2. The Bottom-Up Philosophy

Due to the cutbacks at the general church level and probably due to a postmodern anti-institutional attitude on the part of the local churches the general and annual conference agencies began to take the stance that instead of trying to give guidance to the local churches we would let them tell us what they needed. (I had this specifically spelled out to me by a annual conference program council director.) It is true that the local churches were constantly complaining to the agencies about what they were doing content-wise and in another ways as well. I believe this stance was disastrous for the church and for Christian education. Why?

a. The local church leadership, in most cases, has no real way of knowing what it needs to provide an effective Christian education ministry over the long haul without some kind of trained support.

b. Such an approach made it possible for the many para-church groups and others to jump in and fill the vacuum that was left since they were very ready to tell the churches what they needed even though it was not always sound educationally and not always very United Methodist at all.

c. It meant that the denomination ceased to provide a visioning as well as a practical leadership for the church in Christian education and instead in some areas began a knee-jerk reaction to what the local church thought they needed which was not always good educational practice. (There are certainly exceptions here!)

## 3. The Church Growth Movement

In the last 20 years or so the church has become so afraid about its membership loss that we have been taken over by a movement that is uniquely focused on membership acquisition rather than on long-haul member discipling and faith formation. In a recent GBOD paper on Healthy Churches, out of 12 categories, the only one that mentioned what might be identified as referring to Christian education was the one that says that a healthy church "...is intentional about having an adequate number of small groups for learning, spiritual formation and fellowship." There is nothing really wrong with the statement in one sense and it is #4 on the list, but I mention it because it seemed to say too little about the need for a relevant ongoing ministry of faith formation besides saying nothing about the Sunday School when there is a general agency push to build up that program.

I believe that what this movement has done has, unintentionally, no doubt, taken our eyes off of the deeper, long term, task of Christian nurture even though it is still mentioned in various ways as we talk about "making disciples". This movement has seemed to increase the pastor's lack of concern for Christian nurture except as a "Sunday School program" that should be attractive to potential members. That also has meant we are now more concerned with the latest "fixit" idea that will make our SS classes more fun and interesting to the children and youth whether or not they are really effective in terms of faith formation.

#### 4. Local Church Staffing Practices

Due to one or more of the above mentioned issues and a continued perceived funding problem, the local churches have so lost a sense of the importance, the critical necessity of, where possible, having staff persons that have educational/formational expertise. Therefore, they have begun a wide-ranging laying off of trained persons and hiring part-time lay people to “run the SS program” or an age level “program”. These well intentioned people cannot possibly provide the expertise and the leadership the church needs, but the church seems to no longer think they need that expertise. What this means is that what the local church thinks is needed in our nurture ministries has little to do with in-depth Christian formation. I must admit that my experience has been that pastors have never fully understood (because they were not helped to do so by the seminary, through no fault of the Christian education instructors and professors) the need for expertise in Christian nurture, but today it has reach a new high due to the other forces surrounding it.

I am well aware that the majority of the churches will never be able to have a trained professional on the staff even it they wanted to. But that just points up the need for a better system of training of lay persons and more support staff at the annual conference level as well as doing something to develop more “set apart” staff persons in Christian formation to serve local churches where they are needed.

#### **The Future: The Need for a Vision**

The “golden days” of Christian Education that flowed from the great religious education movement of the early 20th century are gone, and gone for good! And in many ways it is time for them to go for this really is a new day in the arena of Christian nurture.

The emphasis on the insights of modern psychology and sociology as it applied to education was and is tremendously important and the best must not be lost as we go into the future. The new day that has dawned is a day when we have learned (and actually knew long ago) that our efforts must move beyond schooling in beliefs and Bible information and toward a “transformative” approach to our nurture of Christians.

Even though the day has dawned the situation in the practice of Christian education/nuture/formation in the local churches is “muddy” at best in terms of our having a clear sense of what we are about. We are trying all sorts of things without any unifying vision and because of the factors mentioned above we are doing those things that seem advantageous at the moment for whatever goals we do come up with whether or not they are truly effective in terms of Christian formation.

In his 1982 book, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education*, Jack Seymour noted the pessimism about religious education in the 1970’s and that a new search for an identity for the field of religious education was being mounted and some fruits were being seen. (Seymour, 12) There are many excellent contributions to the effort and they are clear pointers toward what we need to be about. However, I believe we still must do some serious thinking and work on encouraging and allowing a guiding vision to come to the surface.

We must become ever more clear about the nature of our task for the future and begin to communicate that vision, because to paraphrase a proverb: “Without a vision the *leaders* perish.” We have watched the withering of our ecology of leadership formation for the last 40 years or so because we have not had that guiding vision. God is offering us one now and, I contend, that until we begin to be concerned to listen seriously for, clarify and state, and to nurture such a vision among us and within the church, our leadership formation efforts will not “catch” because our ministry has no “fire”.

### **Hints of a Vision**

I have already mentioned the most important direction for the vision and we are already talking about it in many ways: a vision of a ministry that is focused on our guiding persons into a relationship with God in Christ that is transformative. Such a ministry is the path of spiritual formation and not simply schooling in beliefs. One that is focused on God and our relationship with God very intentionally and in every way. I hope that you understand my direction here because there is not space here to fully describe such a vision.

I do want to relay an experience at a recent seminar where Marcus Borg, Joan Chittister and John Dominic Crosson spoke for three days on “Mysticism, Empowerment and Resistance”. It was a powerful time! The relevant point for us (and one that we all know deep down) from that experience was the direct relationship between a person’s personal relationship with God and their ability to truly be agents for compassion and justice in our world. I deeply believe that what has happened in our country and elsewhere in the last 20 years is God bringing to our attention how much we need that relationship with God in order to be able to guide our history. The Church is slowly catching that message, but we are far from truly living out of it. We can wait no longer to help God bring this seed that is germinating within us now to full blossom in the Church as a new force for empowering people for the challenge of the future. The leaders of the seminar said that to empower our people it will take our guiding them into this relationship with God--and that is what Christian formation is about!

In light of this vision and the issues I have lifted up, there some directions/pointers I want to suggest:

- a. We have a great deal to overcome in terms of the Church’s perception of Christian education as it now is. I believe, however, that a vision grounded in the depth of our relationship with God and presented in a fresh and relevant way is the way to begin to reshape the perception now present and overcome the muddle we are in.
- b. In light of the valid issues behind the “generalizing” direction I mentioned earlier and the very powerful argument made by John Westerhoff years ago, it is time to take with radical seriousness the concept that the whole church forms the Christian and to spell out what that means for every area of the church’s mission. I am sure that there will be turf wars waiting around this issue, but we can find a way through those if we keep our focus on the ground of our vision.
- c. In the light of that direction and in light of the necessity of having persons knowledgeable and trained in all of the formational and educational theologies, theories and processes, we must

reframe the image of the Christian educator into a consultant in formational practices for the whole church's ministry. (Again, turf wars loom!)

d. I believe that the people of UMASCE, academy and agency, are the ones who can bring about this clarifying of vision. It will, however, require us to focus our attention on this central task of the Church while we still work on our particular special projects that are still important. And we will need to be willing to listen and work together on a common project ( as has been done on occasions in the past, as I understand).

I have sought to share my personal reflections on the issues before our Consultation from the perspective of a local church Christian educator that is on a journey (actually a campaign) to truly reframe Christian education into Christian formation. I hope that both the reflections from the past and the thoughts about the future will at least generate some discussion. I usually shy away from such presentations, but after the seminar I just attended I was very encouraged to put my perspectives and dreams out there and see what happens. As one of the presenters said: "The seed never sees the flower." Thanks for reading, I look forward to hearing from you.

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