

EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

CHRISTIAN EDUCATORS FELLOWSHIP
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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Among Christian educators and in the church at large, the health of Christian education in local congregations has been a growing concern. We have sensed

- * disinterest in adult Christian education on the part of a large percentage of adults
- * failure to maintain involvement of youth after the eighth grade
- * increased difficulty in finding, developing, and keeping teachers
- * apparent disinterest in Christian education on the part of many clergy
- * inability to draw parents into the educational process
- * failure of current Christian education to address the changing needs of youth and adults

Lacking an empirical base either to assess the extent of these problems or to guide new directions, six major Protestant denominations (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church-U.S.A., United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and Southern Baptist Convention) joined with Lilly Endowment, Inc., in launching a national three-and-one-half-year study of Christian education. The project was conducted by Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The primary purpose of the research was to discover how congregations promote growth in faith. Of secondary interest was to discover the level of loyalty of the individual to the congregation and to the denomination.

The results of the project are based on a study of representative national samples, drawn from each of the participating denominations, of congregations and their youth, pastors, teachers, coordinators of Christian education, and other adults. More than eleven thousand individuals in five hundred and sixty-one randomly chosen congregations provided in-depth, survey-based data on faith, congregational and denominational loyalty, religious biography, congregational life, and the dynamics of Christian education programming.

In addition, site visits were designed to broaden and enrich the base of the information obtained. Teams of trained observers visited fifty-two congregations judged to have strength in helping persons grow in their faith.

All research has limitations. Among the limitations of the research study on Effective Christian Education is little quantitative data to support the learnings that emerge from racial/ethnic congregations. We are, however, pleased that the site visits will provide a qualitative bank of information about racial/ethnic congregations from which we may take instruction.

A second limitation is that the quantitative study did not evaluate how well we teach children. Again, however, the information from the site visits will enlarge and enrich our understandings in this area.

III. SOME MAJOR FINDINGS

A. The following, briefly noted, were important findings:

- * Involvement in Christian education ends during high school years for many Protestants. More than forty percent of adults report involvement of forty hours or more per year in Christian education, but fully one third spend ten hours or fewer per year in any Christian education activity.
- * A substantial percentage of adults have some difficulty in accepting salvation as God's gift.
- * Many of our teachers have an undeveloped faith.
- * In every age group beyond age thirty, women exhibit greater faith maturity than men do.
- * Four of every ten older youth report participating in three or more at-risk behaviors. Those active in the church report only slightly less at-risk behavior than those not active. At-risk indicators

include depression, thoughts about suicide, alcohol use, binge drinking, drug use, aggression, shoplifting, trouble at school, and sexual intercourse. Most youth report that congregations place little emphasis on chemical dependency or sexuality education.

- * The study contains strong evidence that racial/ethnic persons rate higher in integrated faith than non-racial/ethnic persons do.
- * Parents are not passing faith on to their children.
- * The quality of the worship experience (rated high by three quarters of United Methodists) is also shown to have an important educational affect on members.

B. An important finding is that Christian education matters much more than we suspected. Christian education, when it is done well, is a center of energy in local congregations.

If persons are helped to grow in their faith, loyalty to the congregation and to the denomination is a by-product. By concentrating on ongoing growth in faith, congregations appear to gain the kind of commitment that thwarts dropouts, switching, or inactivity.

The two experiences most associated with growth of faith for youth are

- * the level of family religiousness,
- * the amount of exposure to quality Christian education.

One of the experiences most associated with growth of faith for adults is exposure to quality Christian education.

Further, "a thinking climate" in a congregation is strongly related to growth in faith for both youth and adults. A thinking climate is one in which persons are encouraged to ask questions and to explore issues and are challenged to apply faith to life. "Warmth factors" are important for youth if they are to grow in their faith. Warmth factors include one-to-one fellowship, acceptance, and caring. These are important for both youth and adults in terms of congregational loyalty.

Finally, opportunities for service and mission are important for both youth and adults if they are to grow in their faith.

This data regarding the power of Christian education gives a new sense of urgency and encouragement to the teaching ministry of the church.

- C. Another important finding is the critical role of the pastor in Christian education. This important role was especially observed in the site visits to congregations that are especially effective in helping persons grow in their faith.

The role of the pastor takes on several dimensions.

1. Advocate for Christian education. This dimension includes such actions as public support for Christian education, support for an adequate Christian education budget, and help in securing and developing teachers. Pastors can play an important role in encouraging the brightest and best to teach.
2. Master teacher.
 - * The pastor can teach in-depth courses in Bible, theology, and social issues.
 - * The pastor also can take advantage of all the opportunities to teach in a local congregation
 - in worship and preaching
 - in committee/administrative settings
 - in counseling

A serious reality discovered in the study is that many clergy have lack of training and involvement in Christian education.

IV. SOME NEEDED CHANGES

About fifty United Methodists (local congregation representatives, annual conference staff, national agency staff, professors of Christian education, and Christian Educators Fellowship members), meeting during the national conference on Effective Christian Education, suggested that a number of changes need to be made if we are to take advantage of the power of Christian education.

1. Give Christian education priority attention. Doing

so may require additional funding and staff at all levels of the church.

2. Rethink basic foundational issues regarding the nature and function of Christian education.
3. Develop the understanding that Christian education occurs in the home, the church, and the community. Given the power of family religious influence, we need to give priority attention to the faith formation of parent(s) and to how faith is formed in the context of home.
4. Use a variety of models for Christian education, giving special emphasis to developing "a thinking climate."
5. Value teaching as a primary ministry, putting special emphasis on teacher development. Given the importance of faith maturity for teachers, we have a major challenge to pay attention to the faith formation of those who teach and lead.
6. Make Christian education increasingly multi-cultural.
7. Encourage pastors to value Christian education and to be trained in educational models and foundations. We must strengthen Christian education requirements and offerings in seminaries and post-seminary continuing-education experiences.
8. Focus Christian education more intentionally on helping persons be in service and mission to others.
9. Make Christian education global in its perspective.
10. Encourage intergenerational Christian education to utilize the mature faith of older adults.
11. Develop resources (curriculum and program) to undergird the new directions and priority of Christian education.

V. CONCLUSION

Christian education happens as we worship, as we serve one another, as we live together in our homes, and as we reach out into the world.

The research data indicates that in a majority of congregations when Christian education is seen as an isolated program, it is a "tired enterprise in need of reform." Christian education is often out of touch with

the real-life needs of youth and adults. It is increasingly difficult to find and motivate teachers. Many youth and adults exhibit disinterest in Christian education. Congregations are using models and procedures that have changed little over time.

The research data also indicates that effective Christian education has the potential to deepen faith, to bring loyalty to the congregation and the denomination, and to deepen commitment to Christ.

It is my judgment that Christian education is a center of energy in a local congregation that needs intentional and priority attention.

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