

Christian Education Reference Committee

The Christian education unit sits within the mandate of Uniting Faith and Discipleship and works collaboratively with other units of the team

1. INTRODUCTION

Christian education is essential to the church. Jesus commanded his disciples in Matthew 28: 19-20 to “go, make disciples ...baptizing ... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Within the church we may use differing terms to speak of this – formation, faith development, spiritual growth, nurture, teaching, etc. Our Christian growth in faith and witness throughout our lives depends on the very process of Christian education as we study the scriptures, explore new and old interpretations of church doctrines and learn to communicate with God in richer ways. The learning comes in both conscious and subconscious ways as we observe and participate, and then allow God’s Holy Spirit to move in us as teacher, reinforcing or challenging what humans have expressed in a variety of media, including multimedia presentations and digital environments.

2. THE SCOPE OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Within the church, for organizational reasons, we may pursue Christian education through various functions: ranging from formation and faith development to teaching and ministry with children, youth, adults and families; but essentially this is the core work of the church, the education of the church as the people of God.

The Reference Committee has spent some time seeking to develop a current definition of Christian education that may help guide the church as it considers the place and priority of this ministry.

Christian education involves intentional nurture, teaching and learning individually and in community for lifelong Christian discipleship in local and global contexts.

This involves:

- Learning to live faithfully as Christian disciples in a multi-cultural and multi-faith world.
- Learning how to reflect theologically and act in response to the big issues of the day.

- Understanding core Christian beliefs and practices including those central to the Uniting Church.
- Recruiting and equipping teachers/leaders to nurture children and young people in the Christian faith.
- Creating appropriate learning opportunities, particularly for children and young people, to grow in faith.
- Assisting leaders to develop inclusive learning communities able to share faith stories, insights and challenges on their Christian journey
- Developing and maintaining a Christian ethos within UCA Schools and Agencies.
- Expanding our understanding of the Bible and our capacity to interpret it for our lives.
- Developing our capacity to articulate our faith with others. Fostering leadership for fresh expressions of being church.
- Helping people discern their gifts and be equipped to offer them in service, leadership or ministry.
- Exploring the spiritual dimension of life and ways to enhance our Christian spirituality.

This broad definition is designed to assist the Committee in its work, and also offered to the church as together we seek to develop these capacities in congregations, faith communities, schools and agencies. It should be noted that this particular description is only related indirectly to the Christian Education Research Project (later in this report) the purpose of which in part is to investigate how congregations and leaders themselves define and undertake these aspects of ministry.

3. KEY DIRECTIONS

The Christian Education Reference Committee (CERC) has worked with the following key directions of the last Assembly as it undertook its work.

- c) in consultation with other Councils of the Church
 - (i) support and nurture a passion for evangelism, discipleship formation and leadership development
- d) commit to:
 - (ii) articulate and celebrate our identity as the Uniting Church in Australia;
 - (iii) the education of our members to better know, own and share their faith; and
 - (iv) encourage a conversation as to what we need to be as a church

4. STAFF ARRANGEMENTS

At its March 2010 meeting, the Assembly Standing Committee resolved to explore further the role of Christian education in the life

of the Uniting Church and in particular the contribution Assembly Christian Education might make to the Church into the future. It chose to do this through a Christian education research project. Mr. Craig Mitchell was appointed as Christian education Research Fellow for a period of two years from 28th February 2011. Prior to this the National Director of Christian education was Rev Dr Mark Hillis. The Christian Education Reference Committee (CERC) records our deep appreciation for the work done by Rev Dr Mark Hillis. The full extent of this appreciation will be recorded in a special minute to the Assembly.

5. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AT THE ASSEMBLY PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

5.1. National Schools Consultative Group

The National Schools Consultative group which consists of Synod personnel with the responsibility of connecting with UCA schools has been meeting twice per year for one-two days. This was an initiative of the former National Director of Christian Education Rev Dr Mark Hillis, and has been invaluable for those attending. The main recurring issues discussed are:

- Board appointments and resources for induction
- Curriculum materials for the classroom
- Risks relevant to the church associated with schools
- The role and needs of chaplains in schools
- Impact of new legislation and regulations for schools and governing bodies
- The ethos of Uniting Church schools
- The relationship between schools and church
- Networking of schools

In 2011, a schools conference hosted by Prince Alfred College was held in Adelaide and attended by representatives of some 38 UCA schools across the country. The mix included Principal, Board Chairs and chaplains. As well, the members of the Consultative group were present. Rev Alistair Macrae and Rev Andrew Symes were the keynote speakers and addressed the DNA of the UCA and the Education Charter respectively. There was a desire

amongst the schools for more connectedness and more understanding of the UCA but also a wish to retain their independence. As a follow up various attendees committed to working on particular projects. Amongst others, there is a group looking at how we support indigenous students and another on how we mentor new Principals. There was a commitment to having a conference every two years. The conference was the first time many of the schools had become aware of the National Charter on Education and that there was a consultative group.

During the last few years, all of the Synods have been working to establish closer links with the schools in their area and the signs are very encouraging. Most, if not all synods have been able to bring more clarity around the relationships and further work is being undertaken.

There is much scope for this group to work collaboratively but the main challenge is time since a number of us are in part-time roles. Each synod has configured the role with schools differently but this enhances our conversations rather than impeding them. An ongoing challenge for our church with respect to schools will be providing sufficient highly trained chaplains to fulfill those roles.

5.2 Next Generations Project

The Next Generations Project commenced 2008, primarily as an initiative of the National Director. The Project was designed to provide encouragement to a range of initiatives related to Christian education and faith development with children, youth and young adults and their families. Several of the initiatives received small amounts of funding from the Assembly Christian Education budget. Some activities were more in the nature of 'think tanks', with individuals encouraged to research particular areas of interest.

Project areas have included

- Play-based Christian education for children
- Virtual 3D digital arenas for Christian education
- Sexuality education for young people

- Generations in conversation together
- Youth spirituality and contemporary media
- Young adults' spiritual journeys in relation to the church
- Learnings from leading Christian educators
- Godly Play
- Spiritual formation through pilgrimage

The Reference Committee developed a website at www.nextgenerations.org.au to share ongoing thinking and resources from the Project. It needs to be said that while some of the above have produced helpful learnings and resources for the church, overall there has been less progress and publishing than was originally hoped. Given that the Assembly role has been to encourage rather than direct these activities, progress and outcomes have been largely dependent on the individuals concerned. In the future, such initiatives will be disseminated through the Assembly website.

6. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION CURRICULUM AND RESOURCES

6.1 Seasons of the Spirit

While the Assembly is no longer in a formal arrangement with the publishers of *Seasons of the Spirit*, Wood Lake Publishing, the National Director and Reference Committee have continued to recommend this curriculum, and assist its Editor, Susan Burt, in recruiting Australian writers. A new set of resources, *Seasons Fusion*, has been developed and launched in 2012, with the Nightcliff congregation in Darwin contributing to its development. Earlier Seasons material has been repackaged as *Seasons Encore*. The Reference Committee will continue to monitor the use of Seasons materials through consultation with the Editor.

6.2 Godly Play

Under the auspices of the Next Generations project, the National Director and Committee provided encouragement and assistance in the development of *Godly Play* training

opportunities. Ms. Judyth Roberts has exercised national leadership in this area in her role with the NSW-ACT Synod in establishing formal links with the Godly Play movement internationally, and fostering a national network within Australia. Judyth is a member of CERC.

6.3 Baptism and Confirmation Resources

The Reference Committee has undertaken some preliminary work in relation to the development of new baptism and confirmation resources for youth and adults. This has included examining new materials from overseas, and some consultation with ministers and youth workers. It is clear that at this time, ministers and youth workers are developing and sharing their own resources, or compiling short courses from a range of existing materials. Further discussions will be held with Mediacom prior to the development of a strategy, which may include a mechanism for original resources to be shared more widely. The issue of denominational 'endorsement' of materials needs consideration.

6.4 Other Christian Education Resources

The Reference Committee has given consideration as to how Christian education resources are developed and provided to congregations, and whether the Assembly has a role in this. The Committee has had an initial conversation with Mediacom to explore how to foster synergy around programs and resources that are seen to be helpful to the church, including Godly Play, Messy Church, discipleship resources for 'fresh expressions', and spiritual formation. It is hoped that the Christian Education Research Project will help provide some direction in this area.

6.5 National Lay and Leadership Educators' Network

The National Director participated in annual gatherings of Synods' Lay and Leadership Educators in 2009 and 2010. Mr. Craig Mitchell has participated in the network in 2011 and 2012 in relation to his research role in Christian Education. The gatherings have devoted significant

time to discussion of Pastors and Lay Preachers, along with mutual sharing of other educational initiatives, concerns and resources. It is worth noting that some of these discussions relate more to the work of the MEC than CERC, and therefore it has been extremely helpful to have Assembly staff in attendance in order to help bridge the gaps

7. JOINT WORK WITH THE RELATIONS WITH OTHER FAITHS WORKING GROUP

7.1 Development of Interfaith Education Guidelines

Australia is a multicultural, multifaith society, and increasingly teachers and chaplains are encountering a similar diversity in the classroom. Responding to that multicultural, multifaith context, the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths acknowledged the need to provide appropriate education for that context – initially it seemed this would mean provision of an Interfaith Curriculum, but after consideration, it seemed most appropriate to work towards providing a set of guidelines for Interfaith Education within the Religious Education classroom. The work we have thus far has been developed over a series of meetings with Heads of Religious Education Departments and Chaplains from UCA schools, and was then presented at the Australian Association for Religious Education Conference on the Gold Coast in September/October 2010.

The objectives of this set of guidelines were:

- To help to develop & nurture the capacity in young people to live successfully in a multicultural, multifaith society
- To help to develop skills in young people for dialogue and conflict resolution. It is hoped that understanding will help to create spaces and places for discussion of difficult issues.
- To cultivate and nurture a sustainable community of difference based on common values or goals.

- To develop competencies for living with diversity and appreciating difference.

For the purposes of these guidelines, Interfaith Education was defined in the following ways: It is both formal and informal encounter with a diversity of faiths and systems of belief. It is collaborative. It is both academic and experiential. It is interdisciplinary, taking into account the relationship between culture and religion. Finally it does not replace the exploration of one's own individual faith or religion.

This work will be carried forward as joint work into the next triennium.

8. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH PROJECT

In March 2010 the Assembly Standing Committee gave approval for a two year Christian Education Research Fellowship for the purpose of undertaking research regarding the future role and priorities of the Assembly in Christian education. The Christian Education Reference Committee prepared a research proposal which was approved by ASC.

The research project was designed initially with three strands

- an analysis of current trends and emphases in Christian education theory to inform:
- an analysis of Christian education priorities and needs in Uniting Church congregations, schools, theological colleges, and informal networks to inform:
- an exploration of the role of the Assembly in Christian education.

CERC subsequently recommended focusing the Project on congregations and less formal 'faith communities', seeking input from some school and agency personnel, rather studying schools and agencies as well, given that the nature and scope of these three arenas differ so broadly.

Craig Mitchell was appointed as Research Fellow, commencing 28 February 2010 for a two year period. A Project Steering Team consisting of Rev Dr Andrew Dutney, Dr Deirde Palmer, Rev Duncan MacLeod and Mr. Rick Morrell was appointed to

provide oversight of the research design and implementation. Mr. Mitchell gained approval to conduct aspects of the project as doctoral research within the Dept. of Theology of Flinders University.

The second strand of the Project has been framed as a qualitative phenomenological study of effective congregational leadership in Christian education and of the characteristics of congregations and faith communities as effective learning communities for Christian discipleship. The purpose is to determine how leaders and congregations undertake faith development and 'discipling' in their local missional context. This empirical research will be undertaken in the first half of 2012, involving a sample of leaders and congregations across the Uniting Church.

From the outset of the Project it has been recognized that within the Uniting Church there is currently a diversity of language concerning Christian education, formation, discipleship, spiritual growth and faith development. For the purposes of this study, Christian education is defined as *the theory and practice of teaching, learning and formation in life-long Christian faith and discipleship, both for individuals and communities of faith.*

The study seeks to determine whether the nature of the church's post-Christendom mission in Australia requires particular emphases in Christian education within congregations, focusing on the goal of forming disciples of Jesus Christ.

There is little question that Christian education, rightly or wrongly, is seen by some leaders as domesticated enculturation and indoctrination within a community whose primary concern is its membership and survival. To frame Christian education in relation to discipleship is to orient it towards the *mission Dei*, since the Christ's call to follow is seen as an invitation to participate in his life, death and resurrection for the sake of the reconciliation and renewal of the whole of Creation, the shalom of God.

The research project will consider how congregations understand their

discipling priorities and processes as integral to their life together. This is broader than an evaluation of educational programs, and delves more deeply into the ways in which the intentionality of 'disciple making' helps provide order, character and purpose to a faith community. To what extent are leaders and churches that are effective in Christian education adapting intentionally or intuitively to the church's current missional setting and the challenges and opportunities that it brings? What can we as a church learn from their discoveries, dynamics and needs?

The final phase of the Project will involve sharing insights gained from the empirical study with a range of 'stakeholders' across the UCA, and examining the way in which Synods and Presbyteries resource Christian education in congregations. In the light of this, the role of the Assembly will be considered in terms of its mandate, priorities, staffing and structures.

A final report with recommendations will be presented to the Assembly Standing Committee in March 2013. The findings of the research will also be made available to the church nationally in print and video format through the Assembly website.

9. REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Rather than a Working Group, the Reference committee consisted of people with specialised experience and expertise in Christian Education in congregations, schools, both church and government, and Synod/Presbytery roles. Over the past nine years, we have attempted to draw from every Synod and more recently to create links with other parts of Uniting Faith and Discipleship, including the National Youth Activities Reference Committee(NYARC) the Multicultural and Cross cultural Reference Committee(MCCM) and the Relations with Other Faiths Working Group (RoF)

For our membership, the past triennium has had its challenges and its joys. The joys include the completion of Ph. D. programs for Rev Dr Wendi Sargeant and Dr Aaron Ghiloni. Mrs. Carlyne Chandler, classroom teacher and Children's Ministry consultant, has been our

secretary and Archdeacon Rev Joyce Marcon from the Anglican Church in New Zealand continued to widen our perspective and provide continuity from the Joint Board of Christian Education (JBCE) and Uniting Education visions. Rod Dungan, Craig Mitchell and Rick Morrell brought their school chaplaincy, Synod consultancy, Lay Education, and Youth ministry experience while Mrs. Elaine Rae's expertise in management especially of Church schools has been invaluable. Ms Judyth Roberts contributed from her work in Childrens' ministry, especially with the Godly Play network.

We give thanks to all the members of the Christian Education Reference Committee (CERC) for their committed contributions to the work of Christian Education at the Assembly. We especially give thanks to Rev Dr Elizabeth Nolan for her commitment as Chairperson over the last two trienniums. Her expertise, passion and commitment to the vocation of Christian Education first with the Assembly National Education Committee as a member; then working for the Joint Board of Christian Education (JBCE) and then as a member of the Uniting Education Reference Committee is deeply appreciated by the Assembly. The full extent of this appreciation will be recorded in a special minute to the Assembly. We give thanks to God for Elizabeth and for all members of the Christian Education Reference Committee (CERC) for their passion and commitment over the last three years.

Rev Dr Elizabeth Nolan
Chair

Rev Glenda Blakefield
Associate General Secretary