

A study tool for congregational education leaders



Toward a Vision

for Christian Education





Toward a Vision for Christian Education in the ELCA

“The gospel calls Christians to learn and to teach. Teaching is an important means of communicating this central message of the Christian faith. The Word is proclaimed in preaching and in the sacraments, and it is also proclaimed in teaching. . . To teach effectively the good news of God’s activity in Christ means relating revelation to the learners’ own existence, helping the learners grasp the correlation of God’s answer in the gospel to their own existential question of estrangement and sin.” (Reprinted from Lifelong Learning, Augsburg ©1997, p. 17)

Children grow in the faith by the intentional action of parents, pastors, teachers and other members of the community.

Christian education is at the very heart of the church. The people of God, gathered in community, grow in faith and in the ability to live out their faith in daily life. This faith formation is the life-long, ongoing process by which every Christian, young or old, answers their baptismal call to follow Jesus.

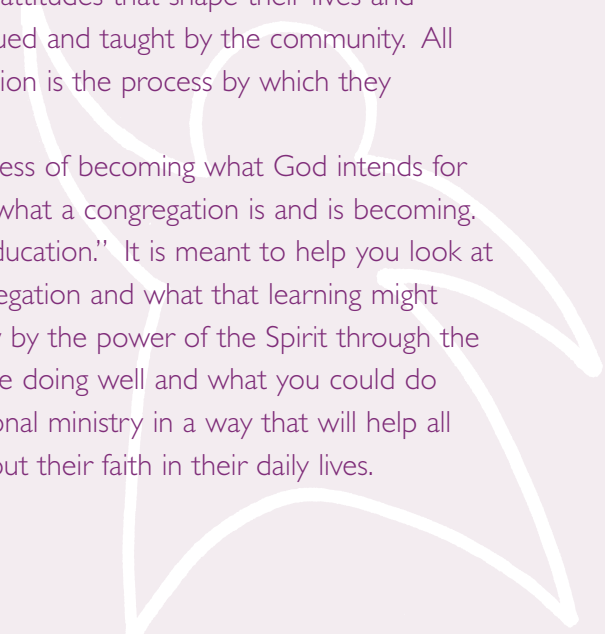
Following Jesus—living the faith is being on a journey. The journey begins in baptism and ends with entrance into the promised eternal life. People on the journey are always in the process of becoming. Communities of faith become what God has intended them to be. Individual Christians become what God has called them to be—fully formed disciples of Jesus Christ.

Individual Christians grow as a part of a community of faith. Children grow in the faith by the intentional action of parents, pastors, teachers and other members of the community. They become disciples of Jesus Christ and learn to live as disciples through the Christian home, the congregation’s Sunday school, confirmation program and in many other ways.

Adults are also in a process of growth. “New Christians” and those who have been believers for many years need to be nurtured in the Word as they continue their faith journey. Through interaction with other Christians, one-on-one or in groups, the people of God learn the faith, grow in their understanding, develop attitudes that shape their lives and acquire proficiency in the faith practices that are valued and taught by the community. All believers continue the process of becoming. Education is the process by which they become.

Those who lead the people of God in the process of becoming what God intends for them are educators. Educators are at the heart of what a congregation is and is becoming.

This document is a statement of a “vision for education.” It is meant to help you look at how Christian education is happening in your congregation and what that learning might mean as all of the people of God in that place grow by the power of the Spirit through the Word. Use this tool to help you clarify what you are doing well and what you could do more effectively to plan and carry out your educational ministry in a way that will help all who gather in that place to learn the faith and live out their faith in their daily lives.



A Vision

for Christian Education

Christian educators participate in a God-initiated (Matthew 28:19-20), Spirit-empowered activity (John 14:25-26). The living Word of God works in and through educators as they engage learners in intentional learning activities that fit each learner and are designed to pass on the Faith. In the educational process the Spirit of God encounters the people of God of all ages so that they are nurtured in the faith, grow in knowledge, and are inspired and empowered to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, proclaiming the Good News, serving God and others faithfully, and working for peace and justice in God's world.

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Notes...



Phrases

from the Statement

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Spirit-empowered activity.
(John 14:25).

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and are designed to pass on

Comment



Educators are those who intentionally teach the people of God. Learning happens in a variety of ways in the congregation. People learn through worship, through fellowship activities, and through a variety of experiences both in and out of the congregation. Educators build learning experiences that will help the people of God grow in faith and their faith living.

Christian education in the congregation is a part of the very mission of the church in Jesus' final instructions to his disciples. The mission of the church is to proclaim the Gospel—the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ and to “teach all things.”

The Holy Spirit comes to people and transforms them as they are taught the Word. As with faith, all learning that nurtures faith and faith life is a gift of God that comes by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word.

For Lutherans, all education is scripture-based. There is no other foundation or source for our teaching than the Word. The Bible's Story is our story. The powerful Word shapes our community and our individual faith lives.

Educators join the learner in a learning experience that is meant to help the learner grow in knowledge, faith, attitude or skill. The educator becomes a partner with the learner in that shared growth.

Education is intentional. Learning events happen in a variety of ways from classroom teacher presentations to immersion experiences out in the world. These experiences are educational in that they are planned by an educator for the benefit of the learner.

The learner is a child of God and needs to be honored and respected as a partner in the learning process. Effective education helps each learner organize his/her experience and apprehend new meaning from that experience by creating an environment in which a learner can encounter something new (God, the Word, mystery) and integrate new meaning from that event. For that reason, all education is contextual. The learning opportunities in any community fit the people of that community and the context in which they live and minister.

“Passing on” means teaching, imparting, communicating, offering, giving, demonstrating, sharing, the faith.

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In the educational process the Spirit of God encounters the people of God of all ages

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serving others faithfully and working for peace and justice in God's world.

By the Faith we mean the set of teachings, values and traditions that define a community of believers. Faith describes their individual and communal relationship with God in Jesus Christ, their relationship with each other in the community and the way that they live out their beliefs and values in the community and in their daily lives. Faith is what they believe as individuals and as a community and how they live that belief system individually and as a community.


The need to learn— grow in faith and in the intention and ability to live out that faith in daily life—is life-long. Education enables all of the children of God to grow—to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

“**Not that I have already obtained this** or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:12-14).

Effective learning creates change in the learner. If there is no change, there is no learning. Change may be cognitive, affective or in the area of skill development. It becomes the prayerful intent of Christian educators to see learners change in a way that increases their faith relationship with God in Jesus Christ, that deepens their spiritual life, that increases their ability to understand and apprehend the Story and Vision of the Christian community and that increases their ability to live out their faith in daily discipleship. By definition, effective learning engages the life and life situation of the learner and the teacher.

Ultimately Christian educators seek to create occasions for the Spirit to bring learners to the fullness of life and faith that God has in store for them. As Spirit-led disciples they practice their faith in daily living as they pray, worship, serve, invite, encourage, give and study the Word.

The goal of education is to equip the child of God for a life of witness and service. We are called to become “little Christs” in God's world, where we “live among God's faithful people, hear his Word and share his supper, proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus and strive for justice and peace in all the world” (Adapted from Affirmation of Baptism, ©1978 *The Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 201).



Implications of the Statement for how we do Christian education

Effective education invites the learner to grow. Learning happens in the individual, as that person is ready to receive and incorporate new knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Education readies the learner, engages the learner, and equips the learner.

Learning events happen in a variety of ways from classroom teacher presentations to immersion experiences out in the world. These experiences are educational in that they are planned by an educator for the benefit of the learner.

Learning events engage the learner according to his/her learning style.

Educators expect learners to learn as they engage in learning events. Learners learn as they anticipate benefit from participation in the learning event.

Though learners can and do learn on their own, most effective learning events are relational. They use, build on, and are enriched by the interaction of teacher with learner and by the learner with other learners.

Effective education is age-appropriate. Effective learning is life-long. At each stage or transition in life, education needs to be shaped so that the learner can apprehend new knowledge, attitudes, and skills and incorporate them in to life.

Learning is not always cognitive; it cannot always be expressed in spoken or written language—i.e., experiences of the Holy cannot necessarily be articulated. For that reason a teacher (facilitator) must sometimes proceed on “faith.”

Effective education happens in a climate that encourages learning. Climate is similar to the spirit or personality of a community. Climate is the sense of self, direction, values and attitudes of the gathering of people. A climate conducive to learning is created by:

- Committed leadership that has a vision of what learning is and can be for everyone in the community.
- Trained and committed teachers and leaders.
- A pastor (staff) that sees learning as opportunity and education as a way to help people grow in faith and in their relationships with others.
- A spirit of wonder and curiosity among the members.
- A concern that everyone be “on board”—share opportunities for learning.
- A leaning into the future with hope. A vision of what the community can be and can become.
- A sense of mutuality that sees the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs, the challenges and setbacks of each person of the community as being a part of that community.
- A respect for and valuing of each person for the gifts that person brings—even if those gifts are not of the expected or usual kind.

Effective education engages people as individuals and as groups (i.e., families) in the learning process.

One educational size, style, setting, approach, technique, method, curriculum, does not fit all. Education must be shaped to fit the learner (age, learning style, life situation) and the context in which the learning happens.



Effective Christian educators share the gospel in their words, actions, attitudes, and relationships.

Effective educators are able to adapt learning resources (resources remain “tools”), approaches, methods, styles to fit the learner. Since teaching (facilitating) is a skill that is built upon people’s gifts, teachers are more effective when they are receptive to training and their own continued spiritual growth. Teaching is an art, a gift, and a calling. The key to effective education in a congregation is finding, recruiting, training, and equipping educators.

Effective educators are positive. They expect a beneficial change in the learner as a result of the learning event.

Effective Christian educators share the gospel in their words, actions, attitudes, and relationships.

Since learning is a life-long process, congregations provide creative opportunities for learning at every age and across generations.

Learning happens in informal ways throughout the life of the congregation and through intentional strategies or efforts to foster change in people. As such learning is both individual and communal, and happens in a variety of contexts and modes.

Effective congregational education is based on a comprehensive plan that is systematically adapted to the context and the learners in that place. Effective educational events arise out of a comprehensive plan and move toward learner-appropriate goals or objectives for the experiences.

Any attempt by leaders to move people from one opinion, attitude, value, or way of acting to another is an educational process. People change as they are engaged in a process of gaining new insights; incorporating new knowledge, attitudes and values; integrating new experiences; owning a new vision for the future and moving toward that future in a systematic way. That process of change requires an intentionally educational approach.

Effective education is invitational. It seeks to open the Word, the life of the community, and the life of faith to the learner and expose him/her to the liberating work of the Spirit.

Effective education is not prescriptive, coercive, manipulative, authoritarian, closed, or limiting. Effective education is invitational, opening, trusting, encouraging, supportive, challenging, inspirational, and liberating.

Effective education encourages questions rather than doles out answers.

The learning of religious facts and information for their own sake is empty. Effective Christian education always seeks to equip the learner for a full faith life that includes faith practices (worship, learning, invitation, giving, etc.)

Though there may be elements of repentance in a learning event, the overall tone of Christian education is celebrative—celebrating the gift of learning, the gift of the gospel, the gifts of God’s promise, the gift of community, the gift of growth, the gift of discipleship.

Though “telling the truth” in a way that the learner is informed is a kind of learning, more effective Christian educators live the truth in such a way that the faith and faith life of the learner is nurtured.





Using the Vision

for education in your congregation

This tool is intended to help those who plan and do education to evaluate what they are doing and to plan more effective ways to involve the people of God in learning. Do all or some of the activities as you come together to work toward more effective education in your congregation.

1. Read the Introduction on page 2. Share your reactions to the following statements:

- "Education is at the very heart of the church."
- "Faith formation is the life-long process by which every Christian answers their baptismal call to follow Jesus."
- "Following Jesus is being on a journey."
- "(All) need to be nurtured in the word as they continue their faith journey."

"Those who lead the people of God in the process of becoming what God intends for them are educators."

2. Read the quote at the top of p. 2. How does it describe what you are doing in your congregation?

3. Read the vision statement on page 3. Note the important phrases or important insights for you in the right hand column. Compare these with what others have written.

- How does the vision fit what you are doing?
- How does this statement describe what you are doing in your congregation?
- What is most effective about what you are doing?
- What emphases invite attention as you move to become more effective in your educational ministry?

4. As you have time, read each of the phrases on pages 3-6 and the corresponding comments. Discuss each using these questions:

- What does this phrase or emphasis mean for us?
- What insight does this phrase or comment offer that can shape how we do education?
- How is this emphasis evident in what we are doing in educational ministry?
- What can we do to be more effective in how we do education?

5. Gather in pairs or groups of three and write your own vision for education in your congregation. What emphases are important for you? Why?

- Gather your definitions and work together to shape a vision for education for your congregation that you all can agree on.
- Talk about what the vision means for what you are doing now and what you can do as educators in the future.
- Choose several actions that you can carry through on now that will help you move toward more effective Christian education.
- Talk about how you can communicate your vision for education to the whole congregation.



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Produced by the Christian Education team of the ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries. Multiple copies of this resource can be ordered by calling Augsburg Fortress, 800/328-4648 and asking for Item code 6-0001-6962-0. \$1.25 each plus shipping.

The full contents of this resource are found at www.elca.org/dcm/christian_education/resources

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