



“Teaching and learning in a faith community”¹

Ideas for leading a Conversation

*For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org*

*This is the third in a series of three conversations that aims to stimulate thinking
about power dynamics in a faith community.*

Although the conversation is specifically applied to Christian communities, the principles used are general and we would be very keen to work with other faith communities on similar conversations suitable to their own situation.

Background

Power and education are inextricably entangled and particularly so in a faith community because the faith necessarily expresses an authority of its own. In this conversation we will explore how people learn about faith and how all sorts of factors from architecture to theology make an impact on that process.

Starter questions for small group discussion

- 1. How do you learn about faith? List the different things that are important to you and put them in an order of importance.**
- 2. What role should the minister play in teaching about faith?**
- 3. How are you helped to think through the experiences of your life?**
- 4. What overall impact do you think that the educational model of your community has on your own confidence and self-esteem as a believer?**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email info@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Begin with Question One. How do you learn about faith? List the different things that are important to you and put them in an order of importance.

Allow people simply to explore the ground. It is hard to predict what will come up here. In some churches there may be an immediate glowing report on the sermons. Others might speak of conferences or festivals that they attend. Some might talk about their own personal times of reflection, bible study, home groups or their walks in the country. Different people may have a range of things at the top of their list. This will reflect different personalities/spiritualities.

Move the discussion on to the way that the church attempts to encourage learning about faith. Use 'the three models of education' resource here. This is a hard hitting analysis. The transmission/transformation distinction comes from the thinking of Paulo Friere (see his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). Invite people to look at each phrase in the models and simply affirm any that they think might apply, even a little, to their situation. This may develop critical capacity in this area. It may become apparent that one of the models is particularly relevant to their situation, or they may use another as an ideal to work towards.

Move to Question Two. What role should the minister play in teaching about faith?

Most ministers, if they are present, may like to hear the comments of their people on this first, but some space should be made for the minister to say how they see their role in Christian education. They may confess to the difficulties of the current model in use. They may tell of the pressure of producing the weekly sermon and the fear of not being up to the task or they may speak of it as the high point of their week. The aim here is simply to explore different perspectives, being honest about the real benefits and struggles.

Notice how the different models of education ask quite different things of the minister.

In the maintenance model the concerns of the minister may be around motivating people and keeping people on board.

In the transmission model the concerns of the minister may be in learning themselves in order to impart to others.

In the transformation model the minister might feel the need to get alongside people, facilitating dialogue that respects people's experience and helping in a process of interpretation as to how faith might apply to different situations.

Some faith communities may divert at this point to a consideration of 'The politics of the pew'. It points to how beliefs actually shape the internal politics of a community. Survey each of these questions in turn. Note any tensions between what is taught and what is practised.

Alternatively

Move to Question Three. How are you helped to think through the experiences of your life?

An important measure of any learning process in a faith community must be how it helps us understand our lives and make connections with what we believe. One way through this would be to invite people to list those elements of their lives that the church does address directly and helps them with – while making another list of things which the church did not address or where the teaching was unhelpful.

Move to Question Four. What overall impact do you think that the teaching style of your community has on your confidence and self-esteem as a believer?

It is very easy for the meetings of a faith community to make people feel 'small' in some way. Attempts to extol the greatness of God through a massive building or in the holiness of ritual can make for silence and awe, which may be appropriate for worship, but may be most inappropriate if worship is combined with education. In that context, the features that exalt God may all too easily also exalt the teacher. The special robes, the elevated pulpit, the serried ranks of pews, all communicate powerfully in educational terms and may act to prevent any respectful educational interaction. One way to highlight this may be to imagine a stranger coming into your church meeting and simply ask what signals are there here that reflect hierarchy? How would that be received in a society which is now much less willing to doff its cap to authority and where we recognise that good education must respect the life experiences of the people involved? Do these structural things actually force your church into a particular educational model?

As a possible aside here see the resource 'How does it feel?' - a description of one Anglican service that I attended as a stranger. It is written as if the person knows little about what is going on. It can be examined in a similar way, considering the signs of hierarchy and what they do to the educational experience.

Resources

Three models of education in use by faith communities.

The Maintenance model

Key concern: People feel out of step with the wider society. Their beliefs may make them feel odd.

Educational issue: There is little understanding of how faith relates to the issues of today's culture.

Teaching focus: Tends to be on motivating people to remain faithful and to be involved in the work of the church. Describes the work of God as the work of the local church community. The world 'outside' is presented negatively.

Prospects: People show signs of dependency. Work skills are generally not considered or valued. Faith remains a refuge. There is little evident growth in confidence in the faith through a person's lifetime.

The Transmission model

Key concern: To believe rightly. To pass on this belief.

Educational issue: The need for certainty and the fear of error can suppresses proper exploration. Can be dominated by experts. Often in lecture form and dependent on academic study.

Teaching focus: The development of right doctrine. Defence against heresy and sin. Tends toward abstract theory rather than practical outworking.

Prospects: People identify their faith with knowledge and remain dependent upon 'good teaching'. Predominant in well-educated and often well-heeled communities. Can alienate others. Demands an intellectual form of leadership.

The Transformative model

Key concern: To integrate theory and experience, allowing the received tradition to interact creatively with the lives of people.

Educational issue: Takes time. Demands a view of faith that can make credible connections with life and culture. May be seen as dangerously open-ended. Who knows where it will lead?

Teaching focus: Built around an interactive method that makes for the engagement of diverse groups of people. Deliberately building bridges with other forms of knowledge and with people's heartfelt concerns.

Prospects: People internalise their faith, learn to apply it to their lives and act it out in society. Faith remains through times of struggle or alienation from the faith community. Faith responds positively to cultural change.

The Politics of the Pew

Churches, like every human group, live in a tension between upholding all that is perceived to be good about their social/religious order and allowing challenge and change. When everything in the life of a faith community is justified by reference to God, knowledge and power tend to be dispensed for good or ill on the basis of a few key questions:

Who knows God here?

In a faith community this question is essentially the same as 'Who knows what is good for us' and determines the basic politic. So if the minister is perceived in theory or in practice to have an especially privileged relationship with God either through learning at college or by charismatic endowment, then they are in a hugely powerful position to dictate the life of the community. On the other hand a church which teaches and practices a view where all have some significant knowledge of God is likely to result in a much more participative decision-making system.

How well do they think they know God?

If a high level of certainty in faith matters is part of the belief structure then this can make for a politic that is impossible to challenge. In this situation every challenge results in a split. The community that cannot bear diversity of opinion will not learn in response to challenge. Alternatively, humility about how well we know God can result in a deliberate openness and the cultivation of participatory structures that positively invite other perspectives.

How easy is it to leave?

In most faith communities there is no physical bar to leaving, but the theology can create effective exit barriers. If the church is perceived as so right and so much 'the' place of salvation that everyone else is wrong, then to leave the church can feel like leaving the faith. This is classically taught in cults and presents frightening opportunities for the abuse of power toward those who are trapped in the system. If by contrast the faith community recognises itself as part of a much wider communion with diverse beliefs, then people will feel much easier about changing their particular faith community and there will be less opportunity for the abuse of power.

Biblical and historical reflections on the politics of the pew

Who knows God here?

There are some very different biblical models relating to this question. The picture of Moses up the mountain receiving the law of God (Exodus 19ff) shows us one person who had a special relationship with God that made him the source of understanding and direction for the whole community. He alone was thought to speak to God face to face. The priests who followed Moses would have drawn on this story to bolster their own authority. Is this how your minister is viewed?

Alternatively the prophet Jeremiah taught that a time was coming when 'each shall know him from the least of them to the greatest'. (Jer 31 v31). This obviously makes for a much more participative form of communal life in a church. Many have seen this a foretelling of the new situation that came into being in Christ.

During the Protestant reformation in Europe a large number of very radical groups arose which experimented with how to order their life. Some tried to return to a model like the first Jerusalem church with the sharing of property. Yet almost all surviving churches have found it necessary to establish some forms of leadership and 'orders' of ministry.

How should we view our ministers today? The fount of all knowledge? Or encouragers and interpreters of life?

How well do they think they know God?

Various Christian groups in history have been so sure of their position that they could only split when they disagreed. Luther fell out with Zwingli over how to think about the bread and wine. Their argument got so fierce that each accused the other of being possessed and when Zwingli was finally killed in a battle, Luther proclaimed that this was the judgement of God. Similarly the Plymouth Brethren have been renowned both for their certainties and for their splits.

Despite the great assurance of faith that the early Christians felt, yet they were clear that there were limits to their understanding of God. Paul said, 'Now we see as in a mirror dimly, then we shall see face to face' (1Cor 13 v 12).

Think about one argument that the church is currently embroiled in. What difference would it make if people saw the limitations of our understanding more clearly?

How easy is it to leave?

We have experienced a range of notorious cults in recent years. Jim Jones led a community that committed mass suicide. David Koresh was another. All were very close 'loving' communities where the outside world was seen as wholly evil and terrible abuse occurred as people found it hard to leave.

Religious communities can always fall into this trap especially when persecution is threatened. Echoes of the problem can even be found in the Bible.

The letter John wrote to his community (1 John) was very concerned to promote love for one another, along with purity of living and right teaching, but there was also another strand. They had a very negative attitude toward outsiders. Outside was 'the world' (1 John 2v16) of which there was nothing good to say. People who had left showed how wrong they were simply by leaving (2 v19) Those who did not listen to the leadership were also by definition in the wrong. (4v6). How easy do you think it would have been to leave that church? Does this matter? Does it help to know that this community may have been suffering persecution at the time?

How does it feel?

It was an old, 14th century building in stone with a spectacularly high curved roof decorated with gilt bosses and supported on great pillars which ran down the central aisle.

The people sat in wooden pews in straight lines facing the front.

Around them was art work in stained glass of largely sweet, innocent-looking people whose dominant emotion is pity or sorrow.

People stand and sing the first of a number of hymns from the New English hymnal. Most of these are from the 19th century and largely exhort people to submission and service.

A procession starts with choir, reader and clergyman in order, all dressed in robes with the priest adorned in a fine chasuble.

The priest sits behind a table at the front facing the people.

The service begins with the priest speaking in careful and slow received pronunciation, proceeding through the set liturgy, with people responding to the lead from the front.

A sermon is given by the reader on the rich, young ruler from Mark's gospel. He explains, in response to 'sell all you have and give to the poor' that this cannot be taken at face value, offers balancing scriptures, says wealth is not a sin and suggests prudent, wise stewardship is the way. In the course of the talk he refers to the 'great unwashed' and those who take benefits without any intention to contribute, while commending charity to the really deserving poor.

The notices point to the charity of the month – which is in Nepal.

Prayers are dominated by concern for the weak and suffering and that people should be comforted.

The Holy Communion is distributed to people waiting in an orderly line with hands held out in a begging posture.

Examine this experience. What elements of it imply a hierarchy? What would it do to the strange outsider in terms of how it made them feel? How would you evaluate it as a worship experience and as an educational experience?