

Faith Learning and Churches:

What if we never ran another course?

Do Christians want to learn?

What is faith learning?

an invitation to a conversation

What role do formal programmes have in faith learning?

When did you last have an enriching conversation?
What was it about?

Do Christians need to learn?

What does faith learning look like?

How do you know when you grow in your faith?

What helps Christians learn?

How do you grow in your faith?

Christian communities have regularly emphasised learning, based on an assumption that we are called to grow in our faith.

These communities have often equated that learning with the sermon or some sort of formal event or programme such as a small group or course. This makes sense because being a disciple does mean being a pupil. We shared these convictions when we started this research project. (Read more on the websites.)

We carried out this research for four years with eight different communities: churches, organisations and groups. Through spending time listening to and learning with them we learnt to see things differently. We want to share this learning more broadly and continue the conversations which have been challenging and enlivening us. Here are some of the things we have each learnt over the last four years.

Real faith-learning and growth in relationship with God is taking place in all sorts of apparent nooks and crannies of church life. Perhaps I knew it before I learnt it here. But the vividness of its reality in the real-life situations has brought about a more profound change in the way I think of teaching, writing, and learning. The Holy Spirit tutors God's people 'in ordinary', more than through all our best courses and resources: through moments of 'break-through' in the joys and crises of life, and in loving, spontaneous conversations.

Clare Watkins

Reader, Ecclesiology and Practical Theology, University of Roehampton



I learnt to pay close attention to what is already taking place. In each community we found Christians seeking to live faithfully where they were. These generally weren't big, well-resourced churches, but smaller congregations feeling stretched and anxious. In the context of church decline it is easy to get distracted by all the things churches 'should' be doing, and yet in these communities these small moments of witness and service were happening in very ordinary places, sometimes without the minister and leadership being aware of it.

James Butler

Postdoctoral Researcher, Dept of Humanities, University of Roehampton



Having been part of this project I think my approach to learning facilitation has changed. For example, in finding our chosen small group resources were disorganised my instinct was for more preparation: reordering and supplementing, seeking better direction for the sessions. But this time I didn't. With minimum preparation, course material was used in response to cues in the conversation. Conversation was left to flow freely, silences respected, insights, personal stories allowed to enter, meander through the conversation and then leave freely. In depth and growth it was one of our stronger small group series

Stan Brown

Superintendent Minister, Kingston on Thames Methodist Circuit



Whilst some reticence and a lack of confidence were detected when it came to learning, much was revealed that was positive, encouraging and enlightening. Community, people, relationships and conversation were instrumental in helping to create a propitious environment in which barriers to learning could be overcome. The need for a broader and richer understanding of learning was unearthed – moving beyond information and knowledge, and more towards wisdom, holiness, loving and living well. Much learning was incidental – learning whilst other things were happening – and occasionally it appeared incognito or disguised. There was a recognition or realization that individuals and communities were often far more developed in these matters than had been thought.

Graham Jones

Learning and Development Officer, Yorkshire North and East District



A recurring theme for me throughout this project has been the place of words – where they sit in relation to learning, and, more specifically, 'faith learning'. Many people we spoke to did not feel confident in finding verbal expression for what often emerged as deep understanding and wisdom. Is it possible to expand the potential for such godly conversation where the words circulate uninhibited and meanings are created and shared? Is it possible to curate spaces which encourage these unplanned moments? Or would even that be too contrived, an undermining of the process which we are seeing in these communities?

Sue Miller

Director of the Susanna Wesley Foundation



The liveliest themes in our conversation have been:

Deep Conversation

The phrase 'deep conversation' appeared in the reflections of one of the research sites. We identified similar experiences through the project. It was these 'deep conversations' which occurred around life events and everyday activities. They build on the relationships already present in the churches and wider communities.

First responders to learning

If people are growing in faith primarily in informal spaces through conversational and momentary learning we wonder what it looks like to support and encourage such learning. How might people become more responsive to those informal moments, allowing them to deepen without formalizing them?

Momentary Learning

Learning seemed to come in the moments of life. Not just the difficult times such as bereavement, illness, and relationship breakup, but also those of joy, of wonder, of chance conversation, or experience.

Informal Learning

So much significant learning seemed to take place away from the formal practices of the church. One participant reflected on her conversations while dog walking and how the conversations with one person in particular had been important for her own faith. Even in more formal spaces it was often the conversations which followed, or incidental moments where growth in faith was identified.

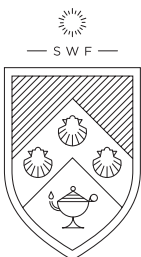
Reflection:

In what ways does any of this resonate with your own experience?

Can you identify 'deep conversations' in your own experience of church?
When do they happen?

What memories do these themes above recall for you?

What might be the implications for learning in churches?



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What Next:

We're keen to continue the conversation.
Fancy joining us? Get in touch:
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