Forming God’s people in the local church: A case study

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Abstract

The formation of people in the local church is a source of great challenge for the west in the twenty-first century. This article develops Alasdair MacIntyre’s Aristotelian practices and Alan’s Kreider’s research on the early Church’s catechetical methods. It then records a project conducted at Camberwell Baptist Church in Melbourne that attempted to apply them in a local suburban Australian context. This was done through the development of nodes that were to practice four practices: Regular table fellowship and the breaking of bread; deep listening; hospitality to the stranger; and discernment. The three nodes referred to in this project had very different outcomes: one node never actually started; one attempted a practice with mixed success; and one embraced the practices after a long lead time and embarked on a transformative journey towards Christian formation.

Introduction

Ours is an age of rapid, discontinuous change; spiritual questioning; neo-romanticism; anxiety; individualism; and consumerism. There is also profound dysfunction in the search for spiritual depth and community connectedness. People find themselves alienated, directionless and hungry. Many avenues tried however simply create deeper experiences of being lost.

Impulse drives much of culture. In Western culture, people dip in and out of activities and relationships often driven by a consumer sense of need for image, feeling or want. The design of suburbs and neighbourhoods facilitates this dehumanizing process. The car provides mobility and frees people to drive for whatever or whoever meets their wants immediately. Local neighbourhoods appear to be pleasant places to live; however, fewer and fewer people really live connected lives there.

Church life is no different from this pattern. Local churches contend for survival and watch as their internal systems struggle because of a scarcity of committed people and resources to support them. Pastors, most of whom entered their role with a sense of call to a vocation, are increasingly expected to become chief executive officers of small businesses and all that this entails. Within a short commute awaits another church that will promise people the things that they seek.

Somehow, there needs to be a way that brings wholeness and unity to desperate, alienated and lonely people who do not necessarily even know the state of their condition. Dorothy C. Bass says there is a rejection of “the separation of spirituality from action, of theory from practice, and of theology from real life.”

During 2006 and 2007, a research project was undertaken to examine the readiness and progress of members in a local church in suburban Melbourne in the area of Christian formation. This project developed four Christian practices that were to be expressed in smaller groups or nodes that lived in local neighbourhoods. This project attracted the interest of approximately 35 adherents from Camberwell Baptist Church (CBC) which was approximately a quarter of the regular church community.

Catechetical Practices

Alasdair MacIntyre’s Aristotelian practices
Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*, critiques modernity and argues that many significant Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment moral philosophers, including Kierkegaard, Marx, Kant and Hume failed in their project because they were all victims of the historical era in which they wrote.

The church is also deeply shaped by these influences of modernity. Consequently, it struggles to comprehend any other imagination or rhythm of ministry. Teleologically the church needs to explore practices in life that can guide it to become an authentic and meaningful sign, instrument, and foretaste of the Kingdom of God in the local and particular.

MacIntyre argues that practices are the only way of embedding people’s highest internal meanings. This connection of practices is where the abstract is grounded in the local and particular. Practices are not perfected but are pursued regularly so as to enable continuous reflection, learning and improvement. MacIntyre says, “In heroic society, character of the relevant kind can only be exhibited in a succession of incidents and the succession itself must exemplify certain patterns.”

The idea of practice is well known to anyone who has learned a musical instrument or played a sport. It assumes that regular participation helps bring about improvement. Improvement may also be enhanced through theory, mentoring, teaching and coaching. MacIntyre argues that it is the actual act of regular participation that is the sign of an individual’s teleological commitment. MacIntyre demonstrates the need for practice rather than romantic intention.

It was the aim of this research project to connect the theory and practice of Christian formation in a local church. It was also the intention of this project to integrate catechesis into the routines of daily life. Rather than being a set of learning exercises in a prescribed curriculum, thorough catechesis will avoid perpetuating the duality of objective and subjective.

This project sought to develop catechetical practices as an ongoing process of holistic spiritual formation. The practices were designed to be pursued in the fellowship of other Christians within the context of a local and particular community or neighbourhood. The definition of these practices is taken from Dorothy C. Bass as, “Things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”

**Alan Kreider’s triologue of behaviour, belonging and belief**

In *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, Alan Kreider summarises the situation for the church in Western culture,

> Throughout most of the West, Christendom is in a state of decrepitude if not decomposition. In many countries shoppers flood the malls on Sundays, while Sunday morning has become a special time for sporting events. And people vote with their feet. In most Western societies, polls show that a majority of people believe in some sort of God, but church attendance has become a countercultural activity.

Kreider then summarises some of the effect of Christendom for mission in a post-Christendom world,

> Many Western Christians have succumbed to a nostalgic prescription for the future in which God, working through revival or renewal or reevangelisation will once again bring about a world that Christians can rule. It is likely that many Westerners will resist this, as they resist Christianity in general, because they associate it with things that authority figures have forced them to say or do. Because of Christendom, when Christianity is mentioned they will experience boredom or revulsion.

Kreider visits the first centuries of Christianity for insights we can glean about how the church can faithfully live under the reign of God. Kreider explains the behaviour, belonging, and belief of the early church as a triologue. He then draws three clues (Kreider’s term) for followers of Jesus in a post-Christendom era. These three clues are all concerned with the nature of catechesis and informed this project.
Firstly, Kreider teaches that local churches need to become communities who have a deep appropriation for the counter-narrative of God as perfectly self-disclosed in the Son, Jesus. As this process goes on, churches become aware of the competing narratives and messages in their context and can maintain a filtering process in regards to which ones bring freedom and which ones bring bondage.

Thinking missiologically, they asked in case after case whether a given practice was life-giving or whether it led to bondage... And at least some of the catecheses of early Christianity were aimed at forming communities of free people in which the addictions of that blighted pagan society were being addressed and overcome.\(^8\)

Secondly, Kreider unpacks the need for a conversion that transforms behaviour as well as belief and experience. He notes that pre-Christendom conversion involved change in each of these three areas and describes how this changed as Christendom emerged. The shift in the fourth and fifth centuries was that instruction gave attention to correct belief, and concern for behaviour atrophied. The conversion of Augustine, also, powerfully influenced this process and changed the emphasis of conversion from a several-year process to one based on experience that was more immediate.

The early Christians led us to reconsider the balance of ingredients in conversion. They wrote relatively little about experience; there is no extensive literature of inferiority before Augustine. They did of course emphasise right belief; already in Justin and Iranaeus this is very evident. But the emphasis in the early Christian liturgies of the believer’s sense of belonging – their affinity and allegiance – seems extreme to us. Even stranger to us is the Apostolic Tradition’s focus upon transformed behaviour as the heart of catechism.\(^9\)

Finally, Kreider makes describes the formative power of the early churches’ catechetical process. Early documents in the Church’s history suggest that catechesis took years of mentoring under the guidance of an approved sponsor, and powerful things occurred in the life of the initiate during this process. Today when people are converted, emphasis is upon inner experience and cognitive belief. In the early church, conversion was a result of a lengthy process and was celebrated by baptism. Kreider notes, “The teaching and example of the catechists and sponsors and the practical involvement of the catechumens concentrated on transforming the catechumen’s behaviours in ways consonant with the church’s understanding of truth.”\(^10\)

So it is with Kreider’s analysis and MacIntyre’s pedagogy that this project was developed. It sought to curate practices that oriented the Christian’s behaviour and belonging as a counter-balance to the already existing emphasis upon belief through an ongoing catechetical process. This project, therefore, paid special attention to belonging and behaviour, given the pre-existing emphasis on belief at CBC, as in most churches.

**Modernity and the dysfunction of the modern church**

It is not intended that CBC be presented as a dysfunctional church. Compared with most churches, CBC is typical. The issues that are critiqued in this case study are, therefore, signs of a deeper malaise in the culture and of modern approaches (or a lack of approaches) towards the formation of God’s people which can be applied in most churches. CBC was selected because I was its Senior Pastor and they were committed to learn. Epistemologically, it will become obvious that modernity is the root of the problem for the local church.

Particular problems experienced in our attempt at Christian formation of people at CBC stemmed from three of the most significant ideas that underlie modernity. It is within these three ideas that a great epistemological challenge awaits the modern Western church, if it truly desires a missional engagement in Western culture.

*Firstly,* thinkers such as Descartes, Kant, and Newton developed an intellectual foundation that thrived for four hundred years, of which we are recipients. This foundation was centred on a dualism between knowledge and the physical realm.

Says Stanley Grenz,
The modern, post-Enlightenment mind assumes that knowledge is certain, objective and good. It presupposes that the rational, dispassionate self can obtain such knowledge. It presupposes that the knowing self peers at the mechanistic world as a neutral observer armed with the scientific method. The modern knower engages in the knowing process believing that knowledge inevitably leads to progress and that science coupled with education will free humankind from our vulnerability to nature and all forms of social bondage.\textsuperscript{11}

Secondly, particularly through the contribution of Isaac Newton, humans have a mechanistic imagination of the universe. It follows logically that the human mind, through scientific method, is able to explain the workings of the universe in an attempt to ultimately conquer it. “The modern human can appropriately be categorised as Descartes' autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton’s mechanistic world.”\textsuperscript{12}

It is this mechanistic imagination that has brought tremendous influence upon human organisations. Initially factories and consequent \textit{Fordism} reorganised societies. However, the imagination for social systems changed, also, because of Newton. Churches, like other social organisations have adopted this imagination, often with modernist reasoning of how mission can be done better with greater productivity and effectiveness. Few, however, have ever stopped to ask what effect this is having upon the faithfulness of the community they are designed to organise.

Finally, Francis devised the method of breaking things into their smallest parts in order to conquer them. His widely known method for conquering nature was through wrestling it to the ground.

This readiness to conquer through division aided by a mechanical imagination has consumed and formed the Western church’s imagination for self-organising and for mission. Consequently, it has also had a huge effect upon methods of Christian formation and often has turned catechesis simply into programs for information transfer.

The cost of this direction has been great. Belief has become a privatised system of information that affects only the subjective. There is little place for holistic catechesis that connects beliefs and objective truth. The area of belonging is also profoundly affected by modernity. Seeing people as individual, replaceable parts of a machine has become a reality in the modern corporatized church. People think that they belong, but they do not know each other.

Grenz summarises,

The ideals of the thinking self knowing itself and of the mechanistic universe opened the way for the modern explosion of knowledge under the banner of the Enlightenment project… [which] in turn, produced the modern technological society of the twentieth century. At the heart of this society is the desire to rationally manage life, on the assumption that scientific advancement and technology provide the means to improving the quality of human life.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{The four catechetical practices implemented}

Christian practices refer to the things that Christians do as a sign of their values and priorities toward becoming like Christ. They are the basic daily practices of how we “live differently.”\textsuperscript{14} The following four practices were developed as a method of preserving the integrity of the nature of Christian practices that would form CBC people so as to foster behaviour, belief and belonging (Kreider).

\textit{Practice One: The Practice of Regular Table Fellowship and Breaking Bread}

The place of the meal has been lost in modern church life. As a result of such busy activity and over programmed lives, many church children rarely spend relational time with Christian adults other than their parents. Children are also rarely present when Communion is celebrated because they are out at Sunday school.
The centring practice of regular table fellowship and the breaking of bread within this context is necessary for the development of a Christian’s life and formation. It is around the table that a place is set for each guest and where a sacred space is created. The description of regular table fellowship implies that there is an intentional space provided for other human beings with whom we share a common concern for the local neighbourhood.

As Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt observe,

The table is where you connect and belong. It is a place where the past remains alive in the memory of the very old, and the future sparkles with possibility. It is enchanted. We lean close together, we share a glass, we tell a story. Through this simple human relating, the universe feels as though it is right again.\(^{15}\)

**Practice Two: The Practice of Deep Listening**

People are good at offering their opinion however few genuine listen to each other or their neighbours. There is a challenge for Christians to learn to listen to each other as well as the world outside the doors of the church. Says Henri Nouwen,

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept. Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality.\(^{16}\)

There is ultimately no way to become aware of both the discontinuous change of the modern world and also to people’s personal needs except through listening. Therefore, people were encouraged, when they gathered, to listen deeply to stories from the Bible as well as to individuals’ experiences through the previous week. Over time, these stories helped form and incorporate the group within the Christian story, their context and how they should respond.

**Practice Three: The Practice of Hospitality to the Stranger**

As hard as a person might try to preserve independence and self reliance, anyone can find oneself in need at random moments. Throughout history, there have been times when people were dislocated and in need of hospitality from strangers. Sometimes people have taken them in and helped them, and other times, no one has.

The stranger has long been a subject of fear throughout history and still is. Ana Maria Pineda comments, “The stranger seems to portend danger – sometimes of physical harm, but also because the stranger represents the unknown, a challenge to the familiar constructs of our personal world.”\(^{17}\)

In the Christian tradition, offering hospitality is a moral requirement. There is an ever-present expectation that God’s people will offer hospitality to the stranger and treat such a one with mercy and justice. This emerges from the hospitality that God has shown in the first place.

Often a host who initiates hospitality to the stranger is the one who soon becomes a recipient of grace and hospitality. This is the circular, mutual nature of this practice. This is, therefore, a step toward the transformation of local communities. Ana Maria Pineda notes,

This circle of mutual hospitality can embrace and transform the people who enter it. The early church, which met in houses, grew up turning hosts into guests and guests into hosts. The apostle Paul, whose ministry involved travelling from one house church to another, looked forward to the nourishing hospitality that awaited him in each place, just as the young churches looked forward to the gifts he would bring them.\(^{18}\)
Practice Four: The Practice of Discernment

Independence is the way we in the West are conditioned, and many would argue it is our right in a free society. We are weak at discerning God’s actions and the things that God is calling us to participate in together.

Luke Timothy Johnson describes some qualities of discernment,

Discernment enables humans to perceive their characteristically ambiguous experience as revelatory and to articulate such experiences in a narrative of faith. Discernment enables others to hear such narratives as the articulation of faith and as having revelatory significance. Discernment enables communities to listen to such gathering narratives for the word of God that they might express. Discernment enables communities, finally, to decide for God.  

Johnson argues that any group discernment process must have the aim to edify. His argument is based upon Paul’s writings which he summarises as follows, “Paul therefore speaks of edification as that expression of the ‘mind of Christ’ (1 Cor 2:16) in which each person looks not to his or her own interests but to the interests of others.” He continues, “Indeed, the entire language of our own age, to the extent it speaks of the rights of individuals or groups as absolute and nonnegotiable demands requiring recognition by every assembly, must be recognised as deriving from a spirit of the world and not of God.”

Johnson also argues that discernment primarily relates concern to the whole group of believers rather than just the individual’s needs or wants. Therefore, if a group member requests something, the group must ask, “Does this build up the whole body or is this a request of self-interest?” When done with time and reflection, discernment can be a rich practice in the formation of followers of Christ.

Outside in the world, background and pedigree and wealth and social status and ambition and power call the tune. In the church, another measure is to apply, one in which gender, social status and race are not to matter either negatively or positively, one in which lowly-mindedness seeks to serve the interests of others, one in which the temple of God is built up in love. This indeed is a daunting standard. But the subject is not getting along in the world. The subject is building up God’s people in holiness.

The diffusion of Catechetical Practices in a local church

Implementation of the practices in nodes

In December 2006, any participants at CBC were invited to participate in groups (nodes) that would explore catechetical practices. The name “small groups” was carefully avoided in preliminary discussions to avoid pre-existing perceptions. The nodes were designed to participate as a group in the four catechetical practices designed to encourage the missional formation of people.

The church leadership council was briefed and informed about the purpose and nature of these nodes. This was supported and three of the members of the church leadership council participated in the project’s presentation morning in December 2006.

Three nodes were commenced for this project. Node A had nine adult participants and three small children while Node B had ten adults and eight children. A third node (node C) was created however the majority of participants in this node were unable to commit satisfactorily to the meeting requirements because of professional travel commitments.

Training Syllabus for Participants
Participants were introduced to the concept and requirements of catechetical practices. A five-week course that was heavily weighted toward group participation and doing the learning throughout the week was employed. The course built week upon week so that, by the end, each member was fully participating in all four practices. It was, therefore, also an introduction to life in a node.

The experiences of the Nodes

Node A

Node A was a group of people that had come together relationally through personal networks. Most of these people had previous employment in churches. They no longer wanted to go to church as they had experienced it, but still had active and reasonably maturely developed faiths and were enquiring as to how to live faith in the world. Of the nine members of this group, four had theological degrees and none in the group was content with the activist model of church that had previously burned them. It was at the second meeting in early April that it became apparent that it might not be easy to implement the practices among Node A. The group was divided. One-third were interested and wanted to commit to the four practices. The second third were hesitant about the numbers of practices and treated the four practices that were recommended as an ambit claim and went about reducing the number to one or two. The final third were against any change to the group and were angry that what had been established was now under threat.

After six months of discussion, the concept of establishing these practices had created a clear division within the group. There was considerable tension as the group faced a choice of risk or of moving towards routine and stability which Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja note inevitably lulls “a company [sic - group] into equilibrium condition that is tantamount to a death sentence.” The project needed to demonstrate flexibility and listening skills if the group was to stay unified.

With Node C already being disqualified, the project became more dependent on the future of Node A. If the project was simply about the implementation of a program of activities it would have been natural to follow Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja's principal. However this project was concerned with not only the achievement of change but also the nature of transition. That is, how systems and the individuals that comprise them can traverse dangerous territory positively in as unified and as healthy state as possible. As William Bridges and Susan Mitchell summarise,

Change requires a state of transition – a psychological reorientation. Transition happens more slowly than change and entails three processes: (1) saying goodbye to old ways that made people successful in the past and are part of their work identities; (2) shifting into neutral coping with uncertainties, and coming to grips with what they are being asked; and (3) moving forward and behaving in a new way. The neutral zone is uncomfortable; it offers the potential for regression or precipitous action. But leaders can employ certain practices to help people through transition.

The second half of the year saw this group generally follow the first practice only. This was not a great upheaval and perhaps justified some members’ level of interest in the group.

Node B

Node B presented a different and inverse experience to that of Node A. After several attempts at setting dates, Node B met for a potluck meal on a Sunday six months after the initial project had been launched despite initial positive interest. This was a group of people who were far more committed and involved in the life of CBC; whereas, members of Node A were on the fringe.

As Node B discussions developed it became clear that there were two members of the group who were opposed to the project. They argued strongly against it and for deeper inductive Bible studies. Ironically, the harder they pushed their opinion, the more resolved the rest of the group became in trying the concept of practices.
With the exit of the two vocal individuals (who were invited to create a separate Bible study), the group dynamics changed profoundly. Quiet members spoke up more and it became clear how dominant these two individuals had been and, therefore, how anxious the group had become. By September the group was finally moving forward.

For the remainder of the year, members of Node B gathered for a common meal, broke bread, and shared their experiences and experimentation with the practices. There were growing stories of practising hospitality to the stranger. Others were encouraged as they eventually discovered that they had already been doing this during the week. This node had generally been weak at deep listening however it became an established discipline within the group, aided by the stories from the practices.

In the remainder of the time for this project, Node B discerned two major items of note. They discerned as a group that something was beginning. They also helped support two members who were supporting neighbours going through two separate deaths of young mothers from cancer. It was out of this experience that they discerned a need in the forthcoming year for greater commitment to their neighbourhood and they determined that they should implement this concern practically and together.

**Conclusion**

This project identified some of the real difficulties and opportunities associated with the formation of the People of God in a local church. Node C was not able to meet at all because of the nature of their work-life balance. Node A viewed Christian practices as negotiable. Node B slowly embraced the idea and connected it to life in their neighbourhood and church. Node B’s point of tension (between members who wanted expository Bible study alone and those who wanted to connect the faith to daily life) was an example of the dualism between belief and behaviour that this project was concerned with.

This project also identified the patience required to navigate well intentioned people who were prepared to argue against change. Christian formation takes a long time. It is very difficult for people to adjust understanding, behaviour and imagination. Much of it is concerned with the process of group transition.

Finally, this project demonstrated that there is scope when properly resourced for an influential percentage of a church system to change behaviour. With continued resourcing and the addition of new groups who become attracted to what they saw, a church could develop a culture that is sympathetic towards more holistic Christian formation.

**Biography**

Andrew Menzies is Principal at the Churches of Christ Theological College, Mulgrave (A Registered Teaching Institution of the Melbourne College of Divinity). He has been in pastoral ministry for twenty years and was Senior Pastor at Camberwell Baptist Church from 2005 to 2010 where this study was conducted as a part of his Doctor of Ministry dissertation. His studies have included BA (VU), BMin (ACT), MMin (CSU), DMin (Fuller).

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1 BASS, Dorothy C [ed], Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), piii
3 MACINTYRE, After Virtue, pp204-225. MacIntyre argues for an Aristotelian approach to moral philosophy which is freed of the modern influence of the failed enlightenment project. Crucially, this Aristotelian approach, in terms of teleology, is grounded in practices that connect the abstract with the concrete.
4 MACINTYRE, After Virtue, p125
5 BASS, [ed], Practicing Our Faith, p5
7 KREIDER, Change of Conversion, p100.
8 KREIDER, Change of Conversion, p101
9 KREIDER, Change of Conversion, p103
10 KREIDER, Change of Conversion, p104
13 GRENZ, Primer on Postmodernism, p81
14 BASS, [ed], Practicing Our Faith, p65-66. Bass describes Christian practices as follows: they emerge from engaging the narratives of the congregation’s tradition—both the larger Christian tradition and the denominational tradition; they resurrect, re-appropriate, redefine, rework, or recover older Christian practices; they lead to a deeper understanding of congregational identity and vocation; they are relevant in their cultural setting yet are not blurred with the culture; they are spiritually authentic, congruent between inner experience and outer expressions; they provide accountability in the community; they demonstrate seriousness in devotion and commitment; they are shared; they foster community; they "cost something" in terms of Christian discipleship; they are not privatized, but have public expression and consequences.
17 BASS, [ed], Practicing Our Faith, p31.
18 BASS, [ed], Practicing Our Faith, p34
20 JOHNSON, Scripture and Discernment, p116
21 JOHNSON, Scripture and Discernment, p132
22 JOHNSON, Scripture and Discernment, p132
23 “The predominant activist model of church meant that the church was all about attending, working, teaching, visiting, participating, performing, measuring, evangelising, watching, committing, reading, memorizing, volunteering, joining. Church was all about performance, and if you didn’t perform, the church had no place for you. The minister was the mediator between the congregation and God, the hub of the church wheel. The minister had the vision and the church existed to fulfil that vision. Participation in church activities determined one’s value.” YACONELLI, Mike, Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p15
25 HESSELBEIN, Frances, and JOHNSON, Rob, [eds], A Leader to Leader Guide on Leading Change: Insights from The Drucker Foundation’s Award-Winning Journal (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 33