The Teaching Church

What is a church?

Churches vary in size, character, theology, and personality. The practices of worship, Christian formation, and mission are common to all churches; the styles, methods, and purpose in which these are practiced can vary greatly from church to church. Nonetheless, there are some important general descriptions of churches that provide useful understandings for those who participate in and lead congregations.

At the outset, a church, as a congregation, is “the gathered, corporate, communal body of Christ” (Harris, p. 247), where two, or three, or more are gathered in the name of Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:20), “sanctified by Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1 Cor. 1:2). The church is a community of believers and disciples described by Daniel Aleshire as a place that remembers the past, evaluates the present, envisions the future, and lives faithfully in relationship to all three. A congregation is a place where faith is communicated from past to present, interpreted for present day needs, and where faith is strengthened in each other “by exercising it with people who share the faith” (Nelson, p. 6). Yet, each congregation has its own unique character, and as a local context, has its own culture (Ammerman). This culture includes its history and the stories of its peoples, as well as symbols, rituals, and a worldview that is created by a group of people in that particular setting and context (Ammerman). A congregation also has a personality created by its history, location, size, beliefs, and leadership that takes shape with the dynamic element provided through the interaction of its members (Nelson). It is St. Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ that captures this dynamic quality of the church and reminds us that the church is as much an organism as it is an organization. Perhaps that is why Donald Miller describes a church as a living story.

Churches, as living stories, in their particular local settings, also teach. Education and formation are primary functions of the church. They teach the story of the faith, as well as the story of the local community of faith with all of its history, traditions, and values. Through educational programs congregations transmit the knowledge of the faith tradition and emphasize the importance for the application of faith for contemporary life. Congregations seek to form and shape the members, young and old, those born into the fellowship as well as those who join the gathered community from outside. Furthermore, these individual activities combine into an overall process that works to give shape and identity to the congregation as a whole.

What is a Teaching Church?

Definitions and descriptions of a Teaching Church are grounded in two guiding biblical passages: the shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and Ephesians 4:1-16. As God’s called out people we are to be always modeling, teaching, learning, and serving. A simple definition of a Teaching Church would be, “equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” As living examples churches teach year by year, season by season, and week by week. Teaching occurs through formal structures of classes, programs, and events. Teaching occurs through the patterns, rituals, and observances; by the way the church organizes itself, and by the choices in resources and materials. Though the congregation, by its very nature and existence teaches, this does not automatically imply that a congregation is a “teaching church.” A Teaching Church is one that embraces these many teaching functions and engages these practices intentionally.

A Teaching Church is one that embraces the role of being a church that learns, teaches, and practices the Christian faith. It is a church that has a commitment to teaching its members, and offering learning
opportunities for them. It is a church that is committed to training of lay leadership, recognizing that a trained, informed and knowledgeable leadership is necessary. A Teaching Church also values the role of teaching and training clergy leaders for the future leadership of congregations.

One of the roles of a church that seeks to be a teaching congregation is the intentional role of mentoring and guiding new clergy making the transition into ministry from seminary training and preparation for ministry to the context of congregational practice. The Center for Teaching Churches emphasizes the essential role congregations play in the preparation of new ministers. No school can do the job by itself. To be successful, ministers need the knowledge, experience, skills, and encouragement that they can acquire only in a local church. A Teaching Church, as the Center uses the term, is one that affirms that teaching new ministers is part of its mission and joins with McAfee in developing the institutional structure to support new graduates as they make the transition into ministry.

Specifically, this structure of support extends for the first two years of the new minister’s transition into a full-time ministry position in a church. The partnership with McAfee provides each new minister a professional coach who works alongside the new minister during these two years. Additionally, the new minister is encouraged to be part of a Peer Learning Group which meets regularly for interaction and for learning. Finally, a Minister Support Committee, comprised of laity from the church, is to be established for meeting regularly with the new minister guided through a 12-piece curriculum. Church contexts establish “a teaching/learning environment beyond the seminary context in which there is explicit freedom to inquire, question, explore, experiment, acknowledge limitations, fail, and succeed” (Wood, p. 291). This structure of support facilitates the building of trust, understanding, and clarity for the new minister and the church where he/she serves.

The role of being a Teaching Church extends the mentoring, shaping, and guiding function beyond the single area of new clergy. This posture and pattern of support, guided practice, nurture, and reflection in learning can be applied in other, if not all, aspects of the church. For example, all new clergy joining the church staff, including ones with previous full-time church experience, would benefit from an intentional pairing of support with existing laity. These new staff members are also faced with learning to navigate a new context, new people, and undisclosed assumptions and expectations. An intentional partnership in this type of transition will serve to benefit the congregation to build trust, understanding, and clarity in their shared ministry together.

**Benefits of Being a Teaching Church**

A partnership in ministry begins to develop as a congregation engages in this teaching/learning role. As a result of this growing partnership, multiple benefits begin to emerge for the laity, staff, and congregation. As a church takes on this identity of being a Teaching Church, what is known as traditional one-to-one mentoring expands as multiple individuals within the organization serve in a mentoring capacity in their specific areas of expertise. This has been described as “organizational mentoring” (Hale). The benefits of this expanded mentoring include collaboration, engendered trust, and increase in initiative. The teaching and learning relationship can become a mutually beneficial relationship involving reciprocity of learning for the minister, laity, and other staff. As coparticipants in the teaching and learning relationship, these individuals share experience as providers of instruction and beneficiaries of the exchange. Several identifiable benefits may emerge from this mutual relationship of teaching and learning as a Teaching Church. Four possible benefits include: 1) the dialogue across the traditional boundaries of clergy and laity, 2) partnerships between the clergy and laity, 3) reflection on practice – by groups in the congregation on ministry practice, and by the staff, and 4) identification and creative action on the conflicts and crises that occur.
As the new minister and laity engage in dialogue about the congregation, ministry practice, and experiences, the traditional boundaries between clergy and laity tend to diminish. A decrease in the usual barriers related to age and generational differences may also be realized. Secondly, a partnership among the clergy and laity may begin to develop from the environment of dialogue. Clergy and laity may experience more shared power and authority, and relationships built on interdependence. Thirdly, the process generates the reflection on practice of ministry. The new minister, the laity involved, and the existing staff will become involved in the reflection of their own work. This generates an atmosphere and models for the congregation members at large the positive aspect of reflecting, evaluating, and refining the church’s ministry. Finally, a church that has a teaching/learning environment increases the potential for honest acknowledgement and approach to dealing with conflicts. All congregations experience conflict, crises, surprises, and failures. A Teaching Church will take opportunity to deal with these in a purposeful manner. This provides the foundation to use these critical moments and events in the life of the church as a means for learning, affirmation, clarification of roles, and evaluation and necessary revision of practice.

Teaching leads to learning, not only for the individuals within the church, but for the congregation as an organization. By embracing the identity of a teacher, the church also becomes a learner, with the experience of learning that can provide for discovery and growth.

References


The Teaching Church Action Guide

Summary:
This essay describes the Teaching Church in a three-fold manner. Beginning with scriptural foundations the first section provides descriptions and characteristics of being a church. The second section focuses on characteristics of a Teaching Church. The final one emphasizes benefits of practicing as a Teaching Church.

Focus:
This module is designed to be used as the final module. The focus is to provide the new minister and Member Support Committee members an opportunity to reflect on the past two years of engagement sharing their experiences, insights, and discoveries.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

• Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of the Teaching Church.
• Provide a copy of the essay for each member of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister
• Share the Summary Statement and the Focus (listed above) with the group
• The following assignments should be stated and a handout copy given to the group members:

Assignment for the individual members of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister:
The essay shares Daniel Aleshire’s description of the church “as a place that remembers the past, evaluates the present, envisions the future, and lives faithfully in relationship to all three.” Use this framework to prepare for this session by reflecting on the questions below.

1. Remembering the past. As you remember your experience during these past two years, what rises from these experiences as most memorable?
2. Evaluating the present. Where has this two-year experience and process brought you? What is different at this present juncture than when you first began?
3. Envisioning the future. As a result of this experience, what would you describe as the next steps for you as an individual? What do you envision next for this team?

The Teaching Church article makes a claim that the process of being a teaching church generates learning for individuals and for the congregation as a whole. The following questions encourage you to consider what this experience has taught. In preparation for the next session, use the following questions to look back over the past two years of your experience through this process:

1. What has this two-year experience taught you about ministry?
2. What has this two year experience taught you about the Church?
3. What has this two year experience taught your church about ministry?
Engaging the Module: (Approximately 40 Minutes)

Phase 1: Remembering, Evaluating, Envisioning
The essay shares Daniel Aleshire’s description of the church “as a place that remembers the past, evaluates the present, envisions the future, and lives faithfully in relationship to all three.” Take the approach of applying this to the two years of your experience together through this process. The individuals in the group were asked to prepare for this session by reflecting on their personal responses to the questions below. Explore these questions one by one. Allow for individuals to share their responses to each question before moving on to the next. The emphasis here is upon listening to each person’s experience. Others may wish to ask for clarification of what someone means, or for further explanation, but remember that their experiences are not to be judged as right or wrong.

1. Remembering the past. As you remember your experience during these past two years, what rises from these experiences as most memorable?
2. Evaluating the present. Where has this two-year experience and process brought you? What is different at this present juncture than when you first began?
3. Envisioning the future. As a result of this experience, what would you describe as the next steps for you as an individual? What do you envision next for this team?

Phase 2: Discussion of the Benefits
The Teaching Church article offers a description and explanation of what you as a new minister and Member Support Committee have put into a real-life practice. Generate a discussion with the individuals in the group to compare their experience with what has been described in this article. Questions to use in initiating and guiding this discussion:

- Having read this article, do you find confirmation of what you have shared together?
- Do you resonate with the claims of the benefits of being a Teaching Church?
- What are the benefits would you add to the list?

Phase 3: Sharing Discoveries
The Teaching Church article makes a claim that the process of being a teaching church generates learning for individuals and for the congregation as a whole. The following questions lead the individuals in the group to consider what this experience has taught. The new minister and the Member Support Committee members had opportunity to reflect upon these questions in preparation for this session. Taking the questions one by one, provide the time for everyone to share their perspectives on what this experience has taught them about ministry and the church?

4. What has this two-year experience taught you about ministry?
5. What has this two year experience taught you about the Church?
6. What has this two year experience taught your church about ministry?
Member Support Committee Assignment

The essay shares Daniel Aleshire’s description of the church “as a place that remembers the past, evaluates the present, envisions the future, and lives faithfully in relationship to all three.” Use this framework to prepare for this session by reflecting on the questions below.

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2. Evaluating the present. Where has this two-year experience and process brought you? What is different at this present juncture than when you first began?

3. Envisioning the future. As a result of this experience, what would you describe as the next steps for you as an individual? What do you envision next for this team?

The Teaching Church article makes a claim that the process of being a teaching church generates learning for individuals and for the congregation as a whole. The following questions encourage you to consider what this experience has taught. In preparation for the next session, use the following questions to look back over the past two years of your experience through this process:

1. What has this two-year experience taught you about ministry?

2. What has this two year experience taught you about the Church?

3. What has this two year experience taught your church about ministry?
New Minister Assignment

The essay shares Daniel Aleshire’s description of the church “as a place that remembers the past, evaluates the present, envisions the future, and lives faithfully in relationship to all three.” Use this framework to prepare for this session by reflecting on the questions below.

1. Remembering the past. As you remember your experience during these past two years, what rises from these experiences as most memorable?

2. Evaluating the present. Where has this two-year experience and process brought you? What is different at this present juncture than when you first began?

3. Envisioning the future. As a result of this experience, what would you describe as the next steps for you as an individual? What do you envision next for this team?

The Teaching Church article makes a claim that the process of being a teaching church generates learning for individuals and for the congregation as a whole. The following questions encourage you to consider what this experience has taught. In preparation for the next session, use the following questions to look back over the past two years of your experience through this process:

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