❖ Part Two ❖

Communities of Transformative Learning

A particularly poignant and pivotal scene in the movie *Toy Story* has Buzz Lightyear discovering that he is not, after all, a space ranger destined to save the galaxy from the evil empire. He is, in fact, just a toy, a child's plaything. Grappling with this revelation, Buzz searches for alternative ways to make meaning of himself and his place in the world: he attempts to cling to his past vision or to take on the identity that others name for him. Finally, when these fail, he is left with meaninglessness and despair. What saves him in the end, what pulls him from depression to new hope, is the support and challenge of his community. The symbols and values of the community of toys provide the material for constructing a new vision of reality. He embraces for the first time who and whose he is—he is Andy's toy, and that is more than enough.

In many ways the dynamics of *Toy Story* point to core elements that are at the heart of adult meaning making. The characters are called to respond to the vagaries that shape the movement of adulthood—unwanted change, complex relation-

ships, issues of authority, loss of status, disappointment in self and others. Each of the toys deals with all this with various levels of aplomb. In the end, the result is a stronger community, one more accepting, more inclusive, and more able to effectively enter into the opportunities and challenges of life.

Buzz's experience, in particular, points to the fundamental experience that marks the Christian's journey of faith: the invitation to conversion. Like Buzz, all Christians are called to name who and whose we are, and then to align our lives and our energies in response to that identity. And, like Buzz, all Christians are to engage in transformative learning and to do so within the context of a community of faith.

A good deal of research and writing in the area of adult education has focused on the central elements of transformative learning. The writings of Jack Mezirow, Stephen Brookfield, and Patricia Cranton provide rich resources for the process of adult faith formation. While care needs to be taken in bringing categories from other disciplines into the conversation concerning faith formation, there are some rich insights that can be uncovered in that process.

The literature from the business world also has something to offer. The discussion of learning organization that has gained attention over the past decade or more provides a helpful way for us to consider the way in which the community is both resource and location for the ongoing faith formation of its members. The dynamic relationship between the learner and a "learning community" rewards careful attention. These are the themes that are at the heart of Part Two.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM ADULT EDUCATION

Consider these three stories—anecdotes of people who are entering into a structured process of learning.

Robert has served as a lector in his parish for more years than you can count. And he is a good one: He proclaims the readings clearly and carefully with just enough dramatic flair to gain the focus of the congregation but not so much that he calls attention to himself. He is conscientious about his preparation; he takes time to read the lectionary passages over carefully a day ahead of time. If there is a section that he doesn't understand or finds particularly interesting, he might peruse a couple of commentaries on the lectionary that he has picked up from the local Catholic bookstore over the years. He has actually learned quite a bit about scripture and liturgy in his years of being a lector. He has a

sense of the liturgical year and the way in which the readings complement each season's themes. He understands the various genres within the Bible and the importance of applying a historical-critical method to reading the scriptures.

Recently all of the lectors were invited to participate in one of several small groups that will gather to reflect on the Sunday readings. They will meet at various times once a week for an hour; there are a couple that meet at times that are quite convenient for Robert so he agrees to join one for the eight-week commitment. He is looking forward to the discussion, and as he gets ready for the first meeting, he wonders if he should bring one of the commentaries with him.

In the same parish are Jim, Ellen, and their family. While Jim usually goes to Mass with the family on the weekend, he leaves the religious or spiritual formation of their three children to Ellen. So how did he end up having to attend the parent sessions during his oldest son Steven's year of preparation for first Eucharist? He asks that question any number of times as he gets himself and his son ready for the first of a series of monthly Sunday morning meetings. To some extent it is the circumstances of the family—Ellen works as a nurse on weekends and doesn't get home until close to midnight on Saturday nights; their youngest seems to be having colds and earaches with some regularity and Ellen is much better at dealing with that; and their middle son, Ryan . . . Well, Jim doesn't actually know what's going on, but Ryan is having a hard time in school and a hard time getting along with others. It is as though Ryan is living in his own world. Jim thinks that Ellen coddles him too much; in fact, Ryan is one of the major things they argue about these days. So when Jim and Ellen sat down to figure out how to accomplish all that needed to be done, Jim reluctantly took on the task of going to monthly Sunday morning sessions with his son Steve.

Meanwhile, another parishioner is entering into a new learning experience as well. Anne teaches theology to the juniors and seniors in the local Catholic high school; she is also involved in campus ministry and serves as the girls' track coach. And that mix of teaching, ministry, and athletics is a good blend for Anne. Of all the things Anne does, she enjoys the senior theology program most. Designed to help students connect faith with life, the course brings the Church's social teaching into dialog with issues of social justice and opportunities for service within the local community and beyond. Engagement in service projects and theological reflection on that experience serve as the heart of the program.

Anne has just found out that she has been selected to join a group of adults who will be traveling to Ecuador for two weeks to visit her town's "sister village." Along with bringing some much needed medical and educational supplies, she and the others will be living and working with the people of the *barrio*, helping to build a community center that can serve as school, clinic, and town hall for the people. Anne is excited about going: she has long taught liberation theology and topics of social justice. She is looking forward to seeing these in action!

Each of these people—Robert, Jim, Anne—is setting off on a new learning experience. Each of them brings to this learning past experiences as learner, as adult, and as person of faith. We hope the learning settings they are entering will be ones that are respectful of their past experience and invite them to new learning and transformation. We will return to Robert and Jim and Anne throughout this chapter as we examine ways adult learning takes place and the potential for transformation within the learning process.

A central concept dominating adult education theory over the past ten to fifteen years is that of *transformative learning.* Within adult education writings, this is most commonly traced back to the research of Jack Mezirow. More than twenty years ago, Mezirow examined the experience of women returning to school after a significant hiatus.[1] One of the insights from Mezirow's research was that the ability to engage in critical reflection about the way in which the person viewed the world and her place in it was the most consistent indicator of success in school and after. The women's learning included a "transformation" in their perspective on themselves and others. Interest in the application of transformative learning theory to the general field of adult education developed in the late 1980s and was enhanced by the publication of a number of works on the topic from a variety of perspectives.[2] At the same time that Mezirow's theory was receiving close attention, adult education theorists were also turning to the work of Paulo Freire, an educator from Brazil, for insight into the reality of adult learning. Where Mezirow's work attends primarily to personal transformation, recognizing social change as a possible though not necessary component of transformative learning, the fundamental concern reflected in Freire's work is the process of social transformation founded on the disclosure of systems of power and oppression.[3] These two approaches to transformative learning—Mezirow's and Freire's—and their complementarity serve as central strands to the process of transformative learning that I propose in this text.

The questions we bring to this topic center on the implications of the theory for adult faith formation. Here we focus on an exploration of the fundamental constructs that make up the foundation of transformative learning theory by bringing into dialog the work of Mezirow and Freire. My proposal here is that these theories of transformative learning can serve as helpful resources in constructing an effective approach to adult faith formation and the task of fostering an adult church.

MODES OF LEARNING

All learning is rooted in experience. It is through experience—understood as engagement with one's social and cultural environment—that learning takes place. Experiences that educate provide the person with new insights, understandings, and perspectives.[4] Learning involves "attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one's behavior, knowledge, attitude, belief or skills."[5]

A child learns to ride a bike through a variety of experiences: her mom explains through words and gestures that the child needs to pedal and balance and keep her head up and steer; the child gets on the bike and takes off with her mom keeping her in balance with a hand on the back of the seat. Eventually, with all those experiences and the multiple experiences of falling over and steering off onto the grass, the child *learns* to ride a bike. This learning is about acquiring *technical knowledge,* knowledge of cause and effect, and of how one relates to and influences the environment.

We gain technical knowledge all the time: how to use a new computer program, how to find the fastest route to work, how to respond sensibly to a child's tantrum, how to run an effective meeting, how to prepare a dynamic class. These are examples of problem-solving learning: we respond to novel experiences by forming a plausible hypothesis for the best course of action and then testing the validity of the hypothesis. The effectiveness of

our action serves as the foundational knowledge for the next time we approach the same or similar experience. We have learned through experience.

Our learning through experience, however, goes beyond simply learning how to manipulate and control the world around us. A second form of learning is *practical*, or *communicative, learning*. In this mode the focus is communication: understanding others and having others understand us. Central to this domain of knowledge are social norms and values; interpersonal, political, and philosophical ways of communicating; as well as feelings and reasons. In communicative learning we acquire and convey insights, ideas, and understandings through mutually accepted symbol systems, through language understood in the broad sense to include speech, written word, gestures, images, art, music, and so on. Communicative learning engages us in the meaning-making process of human be-ing, for it is here that we make sense of the world in light of shared world perspectives.

Technical (or instrumental) learning is often inextricably related to communicative (or practical) learning. For example: knowing how to run an effective meeting is connected with instrumental learning, that is, it is concerned with *how* to have an impact on the world. But, knowing *what* makes for an effective meeting is communicative knowledge, that is, it is rooted in the mutually accepted social norms and in the understanding of structures of relationships that are held by the group. Here the subtleties of leadership styles, notions of authority and power, dynamics of group interaction and modes of conversation come into play. It is communicative knowledge that defines what makes for an effective meeting; it is technical knowledge that provides the skills to run one.

These two types of learning—technical and communicative—correspond with the learning we engage in every day. It is through these forms of knowledge that we come to know ourselves, engage in relationships, further our goals, and negotiate and maintain the world as we perceive it.

A third mode, referred to as *emancipatory learning*, is rooted in critical reflection that brings into question the foundations of one's personal and social perspective. In critical reflection people are encouraged to think contextually, that is, to become aware of how their social and cultural environments affect how they think. As children, and even as adults, we appropriate the perspective, or worldview, that encompasses us—from our parents, our peers, and our social structures. We appropriate unquestioningly the presumptions through which our experiences gain meaning and meaningfulness. Emancipatory learning involves an examination of the presumptions that serve to make reasonable the present worldview. Emancipatory learning engages the question *Why?*

To return to the example of effective meetings, emancipatory learning involves moving beyond *how* to run an effective meeting (technical) and *what* makes for an effective meeting (communicative) to ask *why* this type of meeting is considered an effective one in this context and even what we mean by "effective." Emancipatory learning involves a *critical* look at the notions of power and authority and at structures of relationships that define and limit the way in which this particular group meets and comes to decision.

Mezirow describes the process of emancipatory learning in these terms: "The emancipation in emancipatory learning is emancipation from libidinal, linguistic, epistemic, institutional or environmental forces that limit our options and our rational control over our lives but have been taken for granted or seen as beyond human control."[6] Emancipatory learning involves critical reflection through which we are able to recognize inherent distortions, limitations, and narrowness of vision. Emancipatory learning is at the heart of transformative learning and essential to the various expressions of genuinely adult education.

This is not to say that only emancipatory learning is valid or important. There is an essential interconnection among these modes of learning; technical and communicative learning are foundational to emancipatory learning. It is through technical and

communicative learning that we gain information, insights, and understanding that serve as the impetus to critically assess the premises and presuppositions on which the meaning of our experiences is based. To some extent, the importance of emancipatory learning in adult education, and specifically in adult religious education or faith formation, is predicated on a presumption about the goal or focus of adult learning. Certainly, acquiring new information and knowledge is often what adults need and what they say that they want. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, the work of adult faith formation is rooted in the church's mission of evangelization. The goal is not simply enhancing membership or helping adults attain more knowledge about the faith; the goal is rooted in adults' membership in an evangelizing community that understands itself to be engaged in the proclamation of the Good News and the transformation of persons and social structures to more clearly reflect God's reign. This vision of adult faith formation necessitates emancipatory learning as a core direction.[7] My contention is that there is a significant intersection where evangelization, transformative learning, and adult faith formation cross paths. And it is at that intersection that the framework for forming an adult church is found.

"HABITS OF EXPECTATION"

To equip ourselves to consider that intersection more carefully, we turn now to the basic structure of transformative learning.[8] Reflecting a constructivist perspective on learning theory,[9] Mezirow understands learning as a meaning-making process that emerges from the way in which experiences are interpreted and reinterpreted.[10] Our interpretation of experience is affected by "habits of expectation" that influence what we perceive, think, and feel, as well as what we *fail* to perceive, think, and feel.[11] These "habits of expectation" serve as sets of assumptions providing a way to make meaning out of an experience but at the same time limiting the interpretation of that experience.

Mezirow examines these "habits of expectation" under two rubrics: meaning perspective and meaning scheme. *Meaning perspective* refers to the broad framework, or worldview, that serves as the lens through which new experiences are perceived and understood. It is "a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience."[12] Our meaning perspectives not only provide a context for perceiving and understanding new experiences, they define and limit what we expect to experience. They serve as filters, allowing us to have easier and more immediate access to those experiences that are consistent with our worldview. They also filter out elements of the experience that are not in keeping with the meaning perspective.

> An elderly aunt is buying a birthday present for her five year-old niece. She loves to shop for her nieces and nephews. Though she does not get a chance to see them often, she tries hard to find gifts that they will like. After wandering the toy store aisles past construction sets and action figures, sports equipment and computer games, she settles on a dainty tea set. If someone were to ask her why she didn't buy her niece the expanded Lego Pirate Ship or a soccer ball, she would say with some surprise, "It didn't cross my mind" or "I didn't even see it."

The aunt's meaning perspective concerning gender roles, shaped by cultural assumptions and past experience, influenced not simply the specific gift that she selected but the total way in which she engaged in the process of shopping for her niece. The aunt's presumption about what it means to be a girl and her tendency to nonreflectively take in culturally defined ideas of the

general type of gifts appropriate to a girl are the foundations of the underlying meaning perspective that shapes the way in which she thinks and feels about the task of buying her niece a present. Before she even starts to think about a specific gift, her meaning perspective is already in play, making meaning of the experience and limiting her interpretation of it.

The items she considered to be potential gifts are reflective of the beliefs and attitudes that make up her *meaning scheme.* Meaning schemes, the other meaning structure that Mezirow sets out, are "the specific set of beliefs, knowledge, judgment, attitude, and feeling which shape a particular interpretation. . . . Meaning schemes are specific belief systems."[13] Prior to the shopping trip, the elderly aunt would have been able to tell us that she thinks dolls and games and dress-up clothes are good gifts for her five-year-old niece. She would have been able to state that makeup and nail polish are "too old" for her niece and motorcycle action figures are just inappropriate. These are the components of the aunt's meaning schemes; meaning schemes give particular expression to the generally less-conscious meaning perspective.

Another example:

> Susan, a single, childless adult, settles into the pew to read the bulletin before liturgy begins and then tucks the copy in her purse for later reference. Later in the week, a friend who knows of her interest in social justice asks her why she didn't come to the meeting on Tuesday evening. The gathering was the first in a series of evenings designed to explore the core elements of the Church's social teaching and their implications for this parish. Susan looks surprised and says, "I didn't know about it; it wasn't in the bulletin." "Yes it was," her friend responds. "It was listed under 'Opportunities for Faith Formation.'" "Really?" Susan replies. "I must have missed that section."

Susan's expectations are that the faith formation programs are addressed to children and youth, and since she doesn't have children, she seldom even skims that section. Susan brings her set of assumptions—her meaning perspective—concerning parish faith formation into the way she reads and interprets the bulletin. If we were to ask Susan to state her beliefs (i.e., meaning schemes) concerning the goal of faith formation, she could be fairly articulate on what she thinks. Perhaps she would say that it is designed to teach children about the faith; she might be able to name it as part of a larger process of socialization that includes liturgical and communal dimensions of the parish. But her meaning scheme does not include adult faith formation as central to the faith formation process or the notion that all faith formation is to be understood in light of the formation of adults. And if we were to tell her that this was the case, citing appropriate sources and documents, she would perhaps nod and smile and say that it was a wonderful idea. But that alone would not change her meaning scheme, because behind that meaning scheme are powerful meaning perspectives that Susan could less easily articulate. These are meaning perspectives concerning the nature of adulthood, of education. They would touch on her tacitly held understandings of authority and religion and spirituality, understandings that she has garnered from the cultural, linguistic, and personal milieu.

For both the aunt's purchase of her niece's present and Susan's perusal of the bulletin, "habits of expectation" governed what each person saw and thought and felt. And to some extent these expectations or presumptions are helpful. They help us prioritize what we perceive and think about. Without some pre-

sumptions about age and gender, the aunt would have no idea what to purchase for her niece: a baby's rattle, a doll, cosmetics, and football equipment would all be equally appealing and perceived as potentially appropriate. Our habits of expectation help us negotiate the world and make decisions effectively and efficiently. But they serve to limit our interpretation of experience as well. And when these presumptions or frames of reference for meaning making are distorted or narrow or inadequate, emancipatory learning is needed to ask why we perceive or think or feel or act the way that we do. This is the essential step in transformative learning, that is, learning in which meaning perspectives are reviewed, challenged, and changed.

In Mezirow's analysis of meaning perspectives, he proposes that there are three different types of meaning perspectives, or complexes of presumptions, that we use to make sense of our experiences.[14] While they are interrelated in practice and in causes of distortion, examining each type can provide a clearer sense of meaning perspectives and the way they are transformed. The first is the *epistemic meaning perspective*, which centers on the way in which we conceive of and use knowledge. Robert, the lector described in the opening story, gains knowledge about the scriptures through careful research and reading good commentaries. He believes that this approach, an expression of a tacitly held epistemic meaning perspective, has served him well in efforts to understand the Sunday readings and proclaim them effectively. Rooted in his past experiences of learning, in his dominant learning styles, and in his scope of awareness, Robert's epistemic meaning perspective relates both to the scope of knowledge and to the way in which knowledge is obtained.

A second type of meaning perspective is related to the social, cultural, and linguistic norms that shape people's understanding of the world. These *sociolinguistic perspectives* reflect the way in which society and language make possible and limit our perceptions and understanding. Rooted in the social milieu,

sociolinguistic meaning perspectives consist of those tacitly held ways of making meaning within a particular culture. For example, they shape the experiences Anne and her companions have on their trip to Ecuador. Some in the group see their roles as that of teacher and helper to the people living in their "sister village." With this sociolinguistic meaning perspective, the North Americans understand themselves as bringing the knowledge, skills, and resources to help the people of Ecuador who cannot take care of themselves. Others, hoping to gain much from the trip, are going to be of service and are grateful for the opportunity for exchange and personal interaction. They believe that, in the end, they will learn much more from the people of Ecuador than they can ever teach. Both groups board the plane with their sociolinguistic perspective in tow, and their interpretation of their experiences will be influenced by it.

The final type of meaning perspective is referred to as *psychological meaning perspective.* Forged by the experiences of childhood, these meaning perspectives bear upon the way in which we see ourselves as persons. Self-concept, personality-based preferences, personal strengths, needs, and anxieties: all of these are component elements of our psychological perspective. As Jim gets ready to go to his son's first Eucharist formation program, Jim's understanding of his role in the family, sense of the spiritual dimension of life, and approach to parenting are all reflective of his psychological meaning perspective. His experience of himself is as one who effectively solves the problems that come his way; part of his discomfort and tension around his middle son, Ryan, is that Jim can't solve the problems; he can't make Ryan "better."

One last comment on this discussion of types of meaning perspectives: As is probably clear from the examples, these meaning perspectives are not rigid compartments but interrelated influences of meaning making. The way in which I see myself, while reflective of my psychological meaning perspec-

tive, is also shaped by the cultural context within which I live. My being a middle-class, educated, American, Catholic woman are factors that are integral to the meaning perspectives that make possible and limit my perception of knowledge, social order, and concept of self. While naming these three types of meaning perspectives is helpful for analysis, they are not easy to sort out in the case of a particular person engaged in the process of making meaning of her or his experience.[15] I set them out here because I believe that they do point to the complexity of transformative learning and the impact of the multiple meaning perspectives that each person brings to the learning experience.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. Reflecting on the discussion thus far, name your own insights about the process and place of transformative learning. Do you have anything to add to what has been proposed thus far?
2. Think about a specific experience or decision from the past week: reflect on the "habits of expectation" that shaped your interpretation. This can range from the personal (e.g., what movie you decided to watch over the weekend) to the pastoral/educational (e.g., how you responded to a parent who raised a concern about "covering the basics"). Think about the meaning perspectives and meaning schemes that were in play. How are those categories helpful to you?
3. As you think about the realities and challenges of adult faith formation, consider what meaning perspectives may be operative.

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Essential to transformative learning is the critical examination of the meaning perspectives and meaning schemes upon which the interpretation of experiences is based. Transformative learning involves critically reflecting on these assumptions, recognizing those that are inadequate, and revising them as needed. This is the foundation of transformed meaning perspectives and at the heart of emancipatory learning.[16]

The process of transformative learning is a movement through four moments, each of which is closely related to the others: (1) questioning the present perspective, (2) exploring alternatives, (3) applying the transformed perspective, and (4) reintegrating and grounding of the new perspective.[17]

Questioning the Present Perspective

The process of transformative learning begins with a triggering event or experience that calls into question present meaning perspectives and thus serves as a catalyst for perspective transformation. It is an experience or a series of experiences that expose the present presumptions as not adequate. At times this can be a specific event or experience that does not make sense or that evades easy interpretation; it pushes us to look again at what we know and how we know it. Such an event may take the form of a life crisis: death of a spouse, loss of a job, serious illness, for example. But the challenge to the present perspective can also be more gradual. It can be the impact of a cumulative set of experiences that serve as the impetus to challenge specific assumptions or meaning schemes about self and world. Over time and multiple experiences, there is a challenge of the dominant meaning perspective.

If we look at Robert's experience with the gathering of lectors, we can see the dynamics by which his present meaning per-

spective is challenged. His approach to scripture reflects an epistemic meaning perspective with an emphasis on the reliability of scholarly research and the role and authority of experts. His premise is that understanding a particular scripture passage is dependent upon understanding its historical and theological significance. The approach of the group he joins reflects a different meaning perspective.

Following a process that allows for a breaking open of the Word in the lives of participants, the questions explored are seldom on the historical or theological significance of the text but rather on its personal and communal significance in the lives of those present and the wider community of faith. The process allows the participants to hear the reading several times and invites them to select phrases or images that seem to draw them into the reading. After a brief introduction to set the Gospel in context, the focus of the time together revolves around discussing these questions: How is this reading Good News for you? In what way does it affirm you and give you renewed hope? How is this story an invitation to you? In what way does it challenge you in how you live and work? How is this Gospel calling you to change and growth?

This approach to considering the Scriptures and preparing to proclaim them at Sunday's liturgy is foreign to Robert and rather uncomfortable. After the second session, he considers dropping out of the group but decides that it is important to follow through on the commitment to eight sessions that he made at the start. And over the following weeks, Robert slowly recognizes the helpfulness of this very different way of engaging with the Sunday readings. If you were to ask Robert to explain the shift or to point to a specific moment when he began to embrace this approach, he would be unable to do so. But by the end of the eight weeks, Robert knew and had experienced that there was more to the Scriptures than a historical and theological significance. His spirituality had been nurtured by the experience, and he willingly signed up for another eight-week commitment.

For Robert the process by which his meaning perspective was challenged was an extended and ongoing one. It was more of an unfolding than a response to a specific event or moment. At some level, the experience of the group put Robert in touch with an unnamed dissatisfaction with his prior way of reading scripture. For Robert, a number of the conditions for transformative learning are present in this experience: he is open to change and new possibilities, the prior way of making meaning in this context has been dissatisfactory, there are others with whom to engage in conversation, and alternative ways of knowing are possible.[18] The potential vitality that this new approach offered served as the impetus for him to explore alternative meaning perspectives.

Exploring Alternatives

At the heart of this second moment in the process of transformative learning is critical reflection on the content, process, and premise of the learning experience.[19] Through this critical reflection we can name the values and assumptions that shaped the prior meaning perspective and begin the process of revising them as needed.[20]

Building on Dewey's notion of reflection,[21] critical reflection involves us in the process of examining the assumptions that have bolstered the way we see and understand ourselves and the world around us. Habermas defines nonreflective learning as what "takes place in action contexts in which implicitly raised theoretical and practical validity claims are naïvely taken for granted and accepted or rejected without discursive consideration."[22] By contrast, critical reflection involves reflection on premises, that is, on the presuppositions that sustain prior learning and interpretation of experience. In ways that echo the writing of Paulo Freire on conscientization, we can say that critical reflection involves questioning the very basis on which the problem or situation is expressed or defined in the first place. Here

I draw on Freire to make more explicit that critical reflection calls in question one's social, historical, and cultural context and the way in which one's context influences perspective. For Freire, critical reflection is in service to changing both one's perspective and the social context that sustains it. I will return to this later in the chapter.

The flow of this second moment of "exploring alternatives" involves us first in critical reflection on our present meaning perspectives; we question their *adequacy* in integrating and framing new experiences and their *authenticity* in respect to our feelings. In light of that critical reflection we engage in exploration of alternative meaning perspectives.

Jim's participation, albeit reluctant, in the first Eucharist formation program with his older son Steve served as an experience of transformative learning. While Jim learned a good deal about the sacramental life of the church and the place of Eucharist in the lives of believers, his most significant learning, while perhaps not intended by the program's planners, focused on his role as parent and as person of faith. In the course of the sessions, Jim began questioning his present perspective (the first moment of transformative learning) as the tension at home with his middle son Ryan intersected with the insights and presumptions of a couple of the people in his small group. Jim was not comfortable with the way he interacted with Ryan. Jim's meaning perspective relating to family roles designated Jim as the one in the family responsible for solving the big problems. Ryan's tendency to be uncommunicative, to withdraw into his own world, has Jim feeling uncomfortable and unsure of himself. He is accustomed to making things "right," and yet nothing he does with Ryan seems to make a difference. So Jim brings into the sessions for Eucharist formation a disquiet with his own parenting and a probably unconscious searching for a way to resolve the situation. Given Jim's present meaning perspective, the resolution is in making Ryan "better"; but the interactions that begin with the Eucharist formation sessions present alternatives.

Three sets of interactions served to invite Jim into a process of critical reflection and then to support him as he examined the values and assumptions that shape his present meaning perspective. The first was the opportunity to talk at some length with parents whose perspectives differ from his. Three or four other men who were regular participants in the sessions gravitated to one another as the sessions began and joined with a couple of others to form an interesting small group for discussion. As the group responded to the assigned questions about children and parenting and faith issues, Jim heard ideas concerning family roles and ways of addressing challenges with children that were significantly different from his. For Jim, a key event was one of the discussion times when a couple spoke freely about the difficulties they were having with their child; Jim was rather surprised by this as he was uncomfortable talking about Ryan to anyone. After some reflection on his reaction, Jim realized that his understanding of himself as the one who solved the problems meant that the continuing challenges with Ryan were a sign of his failure to do his job. This served as an important moment in Jim's exploring alternatives by critically reflecting on his prereflectively held values and assumptions.

The second set of interactions took place in the presentation segment of the Eucharist formation sessions. While it was perhaps most clearly expressed in the session on faith development, the primary themes of all of the sessions focused on the essential connection between faith and life, the importance that adults continue to grow in their faith, and the foundation that parents have already set for their children's faith life long before first Eucharist. While the small group discussion gave Jim the chance to look at his role as parent, the presentation and subsequent reflections provided him the opportunity to examine his role as person of faith.

The final set of interactions took place outside of the Eucharist sessions: they were at home with his spouse, Ellen, in the evening after the kids were in bed. At first these conversa-

tions took the form of reports on the Eucharist sessions and passing on any important information. But as the months progressed, Jim began speaking with Ellen more about the insights and ideas and questions that he brought away from the sessions. And over time, when the topic of Ryan came up, Jim didn't immediately begin proposing new solutions but instead spoke about his own reaction to Ryan's behavior and his own fears and concerns. In doing this, Jim was beginning to apply a transformed meaning perspective, one that took him some time to pull together.

Here is one last comment regarding this second moment in the process of transformative learning. It is very difficult, and for many impossible, to engage in the process of reflecting on and critiquing one's present meaning perspective without being in conversation with others. Many people try out new perspectives by talking about them with others or making small steps in hope for affirmation or, at least, acknowledgment. A supportive context in which hospitality and mutual respect are paramount is essential. This is one of several elements that I contend is missing or poorly developed in transformative learning theory as it has evolved in light of Mezirow's schema. While he argues for the place of rational discourse in the process of critical reflection and validating of new meaning perspectives, he gives no attention to the sustaining role of the person's significant relationships, reference groups, and community.[23] We will look at this in more detail in a subsequent chapter as we consider the role of sustained conversation in transformative learning for adult faith formation.

Applying the Transformed Perspective

By the conclusion of the second moment, we have stepped back from our tacitly held meaning perspective, examined the values and assumptions that ground it, and raised questions of the meaning perspective's adequacy and authenticity for us and for our experience. With the next moment we begin to draw and live out implications of the new meaning perspective. And it is just that: a new perspective on our experience, our meaning-making framework. As with any meaning perspective, the new one brings some elements into sharper focus and allows for a clearer view of things that had not been noticed before. For example, in both explicit and subtle ways, the ongoing transformation of Jim's meaning perspective allowed him to see the situation of his son Ryan in a different way and to respond from a different perspective. In addition, seeing himself as a person of faith provided Jim with a new set of lenses with which to view himself and his relationships.

In describing transformed meaning perspectives or meaning perspectives that are more developmentally advanced, Mezirow writes that they are "more inclusive, discriminating, integrative, and permeable (open) than less developed ones."[24] He is pointing to the ability of the more developed meaning perspective to provide for deeper, clearer, and more accurate understanding of experience. It provides a new lens with which to see the world and one's role in it. During this moment, we "try on" the new lenses to see how they fit and how well we can see with them.

Reintegrating and Grounding the New Perspective

This moment can be long and challenging as we begin to integrate the new perspectives into our larger view of the world. There are two elements of that challenge: First, the various types of meaning perspectives, though distinguishable in theory, are interconnected in practice. Robert, the lector participating in a group reflecting on the Sunday scriptures, experienced a transformation in his epistemic meaning perspective. His understanding of the scope of knowledge and the way knowledge is obtained was challenged and changed. But connected to the epistemic meaning perspective are perspectives related to sociolinguistic understandings: Robert's meaning perspectives associated

with his view of authority as well as relationship with the Church and its teaching role. As Robert engages with the new meaning perspective played out within the lector group, he glimpses the implications for other aspects of his meaning making.

The second complicating factor is that a significant (or even subtle) shift in one person's meaning perspective has ramifications on the meaning perspectives of others. Coming home from work in the evening, Jim begins to figure out what it means for him to be present and supportive to Ryan by taking time to talk with his son or simply sit with him as he plays with toys or on the computer. While at one level Jim's spouse, Ellen, may appreciate this and even applaud it, on another level this serves as a challenge to the meaning perspective that Ellen has had about her role as mother and advocate for Ryan.

Anne's trip to Ecuador and her return home point to some of the challenges of reintegrating and grounding new perspectives. Anne's fundamental meaning perspectives were challenged in a variety of ways. Because the trip was designed to support the process of questioning present perspectives and examining new ones, plenty of opportunities for personal reflection and group discussion were planned into the schedule. In addition, the rhythm of the days away allowed time for more informal conversation among the participants and between the participants and the people they were working with in Ecuador. Toward the end of the trip, participants were invited to name core convictions and commitments that had taken shape in them over the course of their time away. It was during this process that Anne realized how much she had learned and how much what she had learned challenged a number of ways of doing things that had seemed acceptable before the trip. Her sense of herself and her place within the school where she taught had changed; her sense of her responsibility to do more than expose the seniors to opportunities for service to the community was both exciting and scary. At a fundamental level, she realized that she had been teaching themes of liberation theology in a way that didn't really impinge on her life and decisions. She both hoped and feared that her life would never be the same again!

Anne's return home was disorienting; she found it impossible to just return to things as usual but difficult to convey to others the depth and transformation of the experience. While it was helpful to talk with others who had been on the trip with her, she realized that people she worked and lived with were the ones with whom she would have to express in words and actions her new meaning perspective. From a distance of three or four years after the trip, Anne would be able to recognize the way in which the new meaning perspectives had been integrated into her life and teaching, but the process would not be easy or clear.

Whether fairly smooth and well supported or long and challenging, at the conclusion of this moment within the process of *meaning perspective transformation,* the person has reached an equilibrium in which a new set of meaning perspectives provides a context for interpreting experiences. This equilibrium, or dynamic stability, is maintained until a new trigger event—a new experience or set of experiences that cannot be adequately or authentically interpreted in light of the present meaning perspective—moves the person once again to enter into the process of transformation.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN CONTEXT

This theory of transformative learning provides an important window on understanding adult learning, particularly those experiences of adult learning that open new and renewing visions of ourselves and our place in the world. Those experiences that each of us speaks about as "life changing events" configure in many ways to the movement described above.

As examined thus far, however, our description of transformative learning is not complete; it is, in fact, somewhat one-sided. If one follows the trajectory set by Mezirow, the scope of

transformative learning would tend to focus on the rational over the affective and imaginative, the self in autonomy rather than in relationship, and the transformation of the individual over the social. I contend that these three themes constitute core critiques of Mezirow's theory that must be addressed in order to make viable the connection between transformative learning and adult faith formation.

The Rational Versus the Affective and Imaginative

For Mezirow, the process of transformative learning is essentially rooted in the process of critical reflection taking place in the context of rational discourse. Here his overreliance on rationality is evident. Rational discourse serves as the setting for critical reflection, where assumptions and beliefs are questioned, and meaning schemes and meaning perspectives are transformed. Given his description of the optimum conditions of such discourse, Mezirow is referring to a setting in which the participants are independent, rational individuals, unencumbered by external pressure and bound only by the consensus of the group.[25] Without discounting the importance of the rational, it provides only one angle on the process of transformation and transformative learning.[26] There is also an affective, intuitive, creative, and imaginative dimension to transformative learning to be recognized and nurtured in the process of enhancing transformation.[27]

In drawing out the implications of transformative learning for adult faith formation, evoking the role of the affective and imaginative becomes essential. Transformation within the faith context necessitates engaging the imaginative, creative, affective, and nonrational in the process. To illustrate this, I briefly examine three dimensions of adult faith formation that move the discussion of transformative learning beyond the rational.

The first is the place of discernment: while drawing on the rational, there is also an "extrarational" dimension to *discernment* as we look to the myths, images, and symbols of the tradition to find expression of a renewed sense of personal and/or communal vision and direction.[28] In Jim's struggle with a new vision of himself as a person of faith and a new direction for what it means to be parent and father for Ryan and his other sons, the dynamics are not simply rational, though for Jim they do begin there. They are imaginative and creative as he enters into the Christian story and sees Good News there for him and for his family.

A second element of transformation within the faith context is the role of *engagement with the classic texts* of the tradition, particularly but not exclusively the Scriptures, in the process of transformation. We approach these classic texts not for solutions to specific questions or even as sources for propositions on how we are to interact with the world. Rather, it is a case of playing with a text and in the process of interpreting the text, interpreting our lives in a new way.[29] In some ways, Robert has moved from his very rational process of interpreting the text to an imaginative and evocative process of allowing the text to "interpret" him. The transformative learning happens for Robert when he moves from grasping the text to being grasped by it.

Finally, the Christian context brings another significant coloring to the dynamics of transformation: *the experience of conversion.* Whether speaking of a Damascus Road-like encounter with the risen Christ or the ongoing call to conversion that is at the heart of apprenticeship to Christ, most would recognize and even insist that the fabric of conversion, while including a rational dimension, is interwoven with the threads of myths and symbols, of creative connections and, ultimately, of the extrarational "leap of faith." For Anne, the weeks following the trip to Ecuador were difficult not only because she needed to think through a new meaning perspective. They were challenging weeks because, through prayer and reflection,

dialog and discernment, she labored to embrace the convictional experience that she had had in Ecuador. [30] In a way that almost defies the rational, Anne knew that her life would never be the same.

These three elements—discernment, engagement with the classic texts, and conversion—are essential to any discussion of transformation within the context of Christian faith and make evident the need to recognize both the rational and extra-rational dimensions.

The Self in Autonomy Versus the Self in Relationship

A significant critique of Mezirow's theory is that it fails to recognize and account for the multiple contexts within which the person makes meaning. "The theory itself, locating perspective transformation within the individual and predicated upon humanistic assumptions of a decisive, unified self, fails to explore the constitutive relationship between individuals and sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which they are situated."[31] For Mezirow, the participant in rational discourse is the individual who examines evidence and arguments objectively, assesses presuppositions rationally, and stands free from outside coercion or internal self-deception.

As we bring Mezirow into dialog with the Christian perspective seeking insights for adult faith formation, it is clear that there is a conflict in fundamental anthropology. From a Catholic perspective, the "ideal" is not the rational individual in autonomy but the person in relationship. The recognition of the "sin of the world" does not excuse the Christian from seeking to overcome self-deception or social and psychological distortions that prevent us from seeing the world clearly. But it does acknowledge that our vision is always clouded and partial this side of the eschaton and that the ability to see clearly is dependent on *both human effort and God's grace*. The role of the Christian community is twofold: it involves holding the myths, symbols, and stories that serve as resources for meaning making, and it serves as the context for disciplines and practices that make it possible for us to see rightly.[32] All of this needs to be taken into account as we speak about transformative learning within adult faith formation.

The Transformation of the Individual Versus Social Change

One of the most significant and heated controversies related to Mezirow's theory is the relationship between individual transformation and social change. For Mezirow, the role of the educator ends at the point of assisting the individual in the transformation of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. What the individual does with that transformation, the implications of that transformation for the social and political context, is not the purview of the adult educator in Mezirow's view.[33] Lacking a coherent theory of social change, Mezirow's approach to transformative learning does not engage with the question of political and social action that is part of other theories of emancipatory education.[34] This is a serious lacuna in his work.

Again, the perspective that the Christian tradition brings to this issue insists upon an inherent connection between personal transformation and social change. The way in which we relate and respond to others in charity and justice, and the way in which we establish and support social structures in keeping with Gospel values: these serve as evidence of the authenticity of personal transformation and conversion to Christ. For the educator engaged in adult faith formation, the social and political implications of transformation of meaning perspective in light of the Gospel's call for justice are of central import. Mezirow's limited understanding of the relationship between personal transformation and the reordering of social structures compromises the value of his theory for adult faith formation. As a corrective, I draw upon the insights of Paulo Freire.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The writing of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire provides us with a clear point of entrée for the discussion of the inherent connection between transformative learning and the transformation of social structures.[35] In an important way, his writing serves as a central theoretical and methodological foundation for many other adult educators who affirm the essential link between personal transformation and social change.[36]

The conviction that shaped Freire's writing and work in adult education is that education is never neutral. Education can contribute to the maintenance of the present social and political structures by inculcating the dominant group's values so that learners assume that the way things are is the way they are supposed to be. Or it can support the process of liberation by giving the learners the resources to reflect critically on their world and to question the present structure. The latter serves as the grounding for the work of changing society toward a more just and less oppressive vision. For Freire, education must be emancipatory. It must liberate persons and empower them to transform the social structures. The aim of education is to enliven the critical consciousness of the learners so that they are able to recognize the presumptions of the social, political, and economic structures and to take action against the oppressive elements.[37]

Grounding Freire's philosophy of education is his anthropology: Human beings' fundamental vocation is to be subjects engaging their critical capacity and acting on the world to make it a more equitable place. Although dehumanization is always a historical fact, it is not human destiny; the human vocation is a calling toward humanization, and we can be agents in our own humanization. The struggle to overcome alienation and oppression is at the heart of human be-ing. Freire asserts: "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its cause, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation."[38] The task of education is to support people in that endeavor.

In light of this task of education and the vocation of human beings, Freire articulates his philosophy of education by juxtaposing critique of the dominant model of education—the "banking" concept of education—with emancipatory education. The latter he characterizes as the problem-posing concept of education. A banking approach to education transfers information from the teacher to the learner; the teacher has the information and the student's engagement "extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits."[39] The teacher is the possessor of knowledge and the student is the recipient; the teacher holds the power in the relationship and the student has none. Given this set of relationships, the banking approach to education—no matter how well intentioned—can only lead to oppression of the students and ultimately of the teacher as well. It may socialize the participants into the existing status quo, but it will not humanize them.

Freire contrasts the banking concept of education with the problem-posing approach that sees knowledge not as a commodity to be handed over but as the dynamic result of human inquiry and conversation. The elements that are at the heart of Freire's model—critical reflection, problem posing, and dialog—are not techniques for the effective communication of knowledge, they are the very way in which emancipatory knowledge emerges.

Given this praxis-based epistemology, the relationship between teacher and student must shift significantly. It is not a relationship of giver and recipient; rather, both are engaged in the process of inquiry that leads to genuine critical knowledge of the world. Freire gives a good deal of attention to the relationship between teacher and student and the necessity of education resolving the "teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students."[40] Freire's attention to the teacher-student relationship is particularly significant in the face of Mezirow's

neglect of this relationship. For Mezirow, the educator is the objective facilitator of the potential transformation of the learner but is in some ways an outsider to the process. That is, Mezirow seems to picture the educator as standing at an objective distance from the dynamics of critical reflection, having the sole task of attending to the optimum conditions for critical discourse. In contrast, the relationship that is at the heart of emancipatory learning—that all are teachers and learners together—must be a foundational commitment of adult faith educators.

A core concept to this problem-posing approach to education is that of praxis epistemology. In its simplest articulation, we can describe praxis as a movement back and forth between reflection and action on the world. A praxis way of knowing involves a series of actions and reflections through which we see the present more clearly and recognize the future that the present is moving toward. It calls us to a critical awareness and analysis of the situation around us, which leads us to evaluate and project the prevailing presumptions into the future for their capacity to humanize the social context. We respond with new action designed to enhance human liberation. In its essence, praxis is not simply a concept related to Freire's approach to education. It is the fundamental way of being human in the world, of shaping the present toward a more just and humanizing historical reality. [41] A praxis epistemology is key to emancipatory education.

Let us now return to the question of transformative learning. As is more than evident from this discussion, the emancipation at the heart of Freire's view of education is from oppressive social, political, and economic structures. While sharing with Mezirow an emphasis on the role of critical reflection for transformation, the purpose of such reflection in dialog with other learners is the recognition of the dynamics of power and the critical awareness of the need for the transformation of society. For Mezirow, the focus is personal transformation that may or may not lead to the individual taking action for social change. For Freire, the focus is social transformation through which the person's reality is transformed and liberated.

In the discussion of transformative learning in adult faith formation, I want to emphasize the importance of both personal and social transformation and the essential connection between them. We need to be careful not to set up a false dichotomy between personal and social transformation. To some extent, the difference is in the dominant lens that the theorist picks up: Freire looks through the lens of critical social theory and sees the need to change social structures that oppress. Mezirow looks through the lens of personal meaning perspectives and sees the necessity to move beyond those that limit our perception of ourselves and our options. Phyllis Cunningham argues clearly for the essential connections between the two:

> To suggest that to educate for personal transformation is somehow not political while social transformation is a political act is to deny the social anchoring of consciousness. To deny personal transformation and to champion social transformation is to deny the unique biography of each person and his or her potential contribution to society and is equally inappropriate. To link personal and social transformation is to construct a polity of democracy.[42]

Bringing these two elements of transformation together is at the heart of adult faith formation and the process of forming an adult church.

FROM ADULT EDUCATION TO ADULT FAITH FORMATION

In this chapter I have attempted to bring into the conversation some of the core concepts of adult education theory, and particularly transformative learning theory, which I believe are helpful for constructing a vision of adult faith formation that

enlivens the adult community to deepen their apprenticeship to Christ and to strengthen their commitment to the mission of the Church.

Adult education theory provides categories that can be valuable in our continuing conversation about forming an adult church:

- All learning is rooted in experience—attending to and reflecting on experience mean engaging in technical learning (how to relate to and influence our environment), communicative learning (what the meaning and meaningfulness of the world is and how we convey that to others), and emancipatory learning (what the presumptions are that serve as the foundations of personal and social views of reality and are they adequate).
- Adult education is directed toward all three forms of learning but places particular importance on emancipatory learning. It is through emancipatory learning that personal and social understandings of reality become more inclusive, authentic, and liberating.
- Meaning perspectives—epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological—serve as lenses through which we interpret experience. Transformative learning involves examining the sources and premises of these perspectives, evaluating their adequacy and authenticity, and revising as necessary toward more inclusive, authentic, permeable, and liberating ones.
- In general terms we can speak of the process of transformative learning as four moments, each of which is closely related to the others: (1) questioning present perspective, (2) exploring alternatives, (3) applying transformed perspective, and (4) reintegrating and grounding of new perspective.

- At the heart of the process of transformative learning is critical reflection and participative conversation. In stating this, I move beyond Mezirow's model by arguing that to place too much emphasis on rational discourse is to fail to recognize the importance and necessity of extra-rational dimensions to the transformative learning process.
- Transformative learning is shaped by and takes place within a particular historical context. The place of a community as context for sustained conversation and forum for expressing newly articulated meaning perspectives is essential.
- While theories tend to emphasize either personal transformation (e.g., Mezirow) or social transformation (e.g., Freire), my own proposal argues for their intimate and essential connection. To emphasize the personal to the exclusion of the social is to miss the historical context within which we exist and learn; to emphasize the social to the exclusion of the personal is to miss the unique biography that each of us brings to the meaning-making process and the contribution we each make to the transformation of the world.

With these categories in mind, we move to the next chapter that explores the setting and instrument of adult faith formation—the parish as learning community.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. Reflect on a time in which you experienced meaning perspective transformation. Explore the way in which it transpired; the supports and impediments to the process, both

from within and from others; the long-term effect of the experience; and the insights that reflecting on that experience gives you for approaching transformative learning in the context of adult faith formation.

2. What do you see as conditions within a learning context that are necessary for transformative learning to take place? How are those already present in your teaching setting? How might you enhance or strengthen them?

3. As you reflect on the chapter, what ideas or concepts are particularly important for thinking about transformative learning within the context of adult faith formation?

NOTES

1. Jack Mezirow, *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-Entry Programs in Community Colleges* (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1978).
2. Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).
3. Of fundamental influence is Freire's work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993). For a review of the place of Freire in adult education theory, see Peter Mayo, "Synthesizing Gramsci and Freire: Possibilities for a Theory of Radical Adult Education," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 113 (1994).
4. One of the founding voices on this understanding of learning is John Dewey, who wrote during the first half of the twentieth century. In *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938), Dewey draws out the connection between education and personal experience. While not all experience educates, it is through experience that we learn about the world and the effect of our action in the world. Dewey states that "every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (31).
5. Sharan B. Merriam and M. Carolyn Clark, "Learning from Life Experience: What Makes It Significant?" *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 12 (1993), 131.
6. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 87.
7. While I am arguing here that the rearticulation of the mission of evangelization serves as the compelling reason for seeing emancipatory learning as essential to adult faith formation, it is not necessary to have evangelization as the point of reference to make such a claim for adult education in general or adult religious education in particular. Patricia Cranton, a proponent of transformative learning, states the broader goal clearly: "On the other hand, if we view education as the means by which individuals and societies are shaped and changed, fostering emancipatory learning is the central goal of adult education." Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 19. Mezirow states it this way: "Not all education involves reflective learning; however, fostering reflective and transformative learning should be the cardinal goal of adult education." Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 117.
8. A helpful review of the literature related to transformative learning can be found in Edward M. Taylor, *The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning: A Critical Review*, Information Series 374 (Ohio State University: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1998). Reviewing both theoretical and empirical research done in relationship to transformative learning, Taylor discusses many of the unresolved issues related to the topic. He also examines key concerns related to the practice of a transformative pedagogy.
9. The discussion of Mezirow's constructivist perspective on learning brings us back again to the discussion in chapter 2 of the core human activity of meaning making. From a constructivist perspective, human beings construct the world—that is, they give it meaning. On one hand, this perspective attends to the way in which an individual gains knowledge about the world through the creation of cognitive schemes. (Here, Piaget would be the foundational proponent.) On the other hand, those working from a constructivist framework are also interested in the way in which the person learns through engagement with his or her cultural context. Here, feminist epistemologists serve as a good examples. See Elizabeth Tisdel, "Poststructural Feminist Pedagogies: The Possibilities and Limitations of Feminist Emancipatory Adult Learning Theory and Practice," *Adult Education Quarterly* (1998), 48. For a discussion of central learning theories, see Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella "Key Theories of Learning" in *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). The authors set out five central learning theories, or orientations to how we think about learning: behaviorist, cognitivist, humanist, social learning, and constructivist. Each orientation is founded on a coherent set of assumptions concerning the fundamental purpose of education, the learning process itself, and the respective roles of teacher and learner. Each orientation would also have implications for adult learning.
10. Mezirow writes: "Learning may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action." Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 12. Learning is always given expression in action in the world, understood not as behavior alone but in the larger context of

"praxis." Praxis is construed in terms of the dynamic relationship between reflection and action and "refers to the consciousness and agency that arise from and are expressed in any and every aspect of people's 'being' as agent-subjects-in-relationship, whether realized in actions that are personal, interpersonal, sociopolitical, or cosmic." Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 136.

11. Jack Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning," in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 1.

12. *Transformative Dimensions*, 42. Mezirow's understanding of "meaning perspective" closely corresponds with the concept of "paradigm." As first described in Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science: Foundations of the Unity of Science*; V. 2, No. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), a paradigm serves as a filter through which we interpret and screen sense experiences. Joel Barker has effectively translated the insights from Kuhn and others into an accessible language with application to business. See *Future Edge: Discovering the New Paradigm of Success* (New York: Morrow, 1992).

13. Mezirow, "Transformation Theory of Adult Learning" in *In Defense of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning*, ed. Michael Welton (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 42.

14. While a discussion of the types of meaning perspectives can be found throughout Mezirow's writing, the most sustained conversation is in Chapter 2, "Meaning Perspectives: How We Understand Experience" in *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. His discussion of the distortions of these meaning perspectives is found on pages 123–43 of the same book.

15. This is made particularly clear by Cranton in *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, 40–42.

16. Cranton describes emancipatory learning as "becoming free from forces that limited our options, forces that have been taken for granted or seen as beyond our control." *Professional Development as Transformative Learning: New Perspectives for Teachers of Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 2.

17. Cranton briefly sets out a number of theoretical frameworks that describe the process of transformative learning. The fourfold movement that we examine here is present in some form in each model. See *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, 69–76. In light of his early study with women returning to college after an interval away, Mezirow proposed ten steps that he reports have been confirmed by other researchers. See *Transformative Dimensions*, 168–74.

18. Patricia Cranton, *Professional Development as Transformative Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

19. Mezirow makes a distinction of three types or levels of reflection—content, process, and premise reflection. Content reflection (on what we perceive or think or feel) and process reflection (on *how* we go about perceiving, thinking, or feeling) lead to potential changes in meaning schemes. Through premise reflection, the framework—i.e., meaning perspective—that makes our perceiving, thinking, or feeling meaningful is considered. "Premise reflection leads to more fully developed meaning perspectives, that is, meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable (open), and integrative of experiences." See *Transformative Dimensions*, 111.

20. Cranton analyzes the differences in the ways in which individuals become aware of values and assumptions and engage with the process of revision. Using Jung's psychological type theory, Cranton explores the strengths and challenges that various configurations of psychological types bring to transformative learning. See Chapter 5, "How Transformative Learning Varies Among Individuals" in *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, 92–120.

21. For a discussion of Dewey's notion of reflection and the way in which transformation theory builds on and goes beyond this, see *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 101–4. As we will see later in the chapter when we look at the contribution of Freire, the notion of reflection and critical reflection derived from Dewey and developed by Mezirow is expanded further by Brookfield to look beyond the personal meaning perspective to examine the social and political structures that support the meaning perspective. Brookfield writes that critical reflection can be seen as being composed of "three interrelated processes: (1) the experience of questioning and then replacing or reframing an assumption, or assumptive cluster which is unquestioningly accepted as representing dominant common sense by a majority; (2) the experience of taking a perspective on social and political structures, or on personal and collective action, which is strongly alternative to that held by the majority; and (3) the experience of studying the way in which ideas, and their representations in actions and structures, are accepted as self-evident renderings of the 'natural' state of affairs." "Tales from the Dark Side: A Phenomenography of Adult Critical Reflection," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 13 (May-June 1994): 204.

22. Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimization Crisis* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 16; as quoted by Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Learning" in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*, 10.

23. The category of rational discourse is used in much of Mezirow's writing; see particularly Mezirow's *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* 77–79. Further discussion of the lack of the relational in Mezirow's emphasis on rational discourse is found in Edward W. Taylor, "Analyzing Research on Transformative Learning Theory," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspective on a Theory in Progress*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 306–9.

24. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 193.

25. Ibid., 77–78.

26. One can argue that given Mezirow's starting point in a Habermasian notion of knowledge, it is inevitable that the role of the rational would have dom-

inance. Beginning with a framework shaped by critical theory, one concludes that the process of transformation involves rejecting inadequate and uncritically accepted frames of reference (meaning perspectives). A different beginning point could make for a process more open to alternative ways of knowing. Scott, for example, argues that, from a beginning point within depth psychology, the process of transformation "focuses on profound emotional experiences that force us to grieve the loss of what used to be a meaningful state of being before we move into another state that is deeper and wiser and more in tune with matter, the body and soul, and the material world." S. M. Scott, "The Grieving Soul in the Transformation Process," in *Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice*, ed. Patricia Cranton, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 74 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 45.

27. A number of theorists and researchers point to this second layer within the process of transformative learning—"the cognitive, rational and objective and the intuitive, imaginative and subjective" (Susan Imel, *Transformative Learning in Adulthood* (ERIC Digest 200, 1998 [cited October 25, 2000]); available from http://www.ericacve.org.docgen.asp?tbl=digests&ID=53. See Taylor, *The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning: A Critical Review*, 33–35, for a review of the research.

28. See Imel, *Transformative Learning in Adulthood* and Scott, "The Grieving Soul in the Transformation Process," for discussion of the dynamics of discernment outside the specifically religious context.

29. Gadamer uses the image of conversation as a way to speak about the relationship between text and reader, particularly between classic texts and reader. Gadamer's notion of conversation moves beyond the commonplace exchange of information or pleasantries and sees the genuine conversation as a place where the conversation partners are at risk and where the conversation itself takes control. While we may want to say that we conduct a conversation, it is more the case that it "conducts" us. Once establishing the elements of conversation between two people, Gadamer argues that "Everything we have said characterizing the situation of two people coming to an understanding in conversation has a genuine application to hermeneutics, which is concerned with *understanding texts*." (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed. [New York: Continuum, 1999], 385.) For Gadamer, and I would argue in the event of transformative learning, understanding comes at the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader, a context within which a "fusion of horizons" is possible.

30. A helpful way to speak about this element of conversion is set out in James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). In addition to describing a process of transformation that is similar to the one that I have described here, he expands the notion of transformational experiences by arguing that they are not simply about the person's understanding of the world, but also serve as essential elements of the person's experience of the "Holy" and the "Void." It is interesting that Mezirow twice makes reference to Loder in his *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. While tracing out the steps that Loder proposes for "transformational knowing," Mezirow totally misses Loder's anthropology and the dynamic of the relationship between void and Holy which Loder places at the heart of the transformation process.

31. M. Carolyn and A. L. Wilson Clark, "Context and Rationality in Mezirow's Theory of Transformational Learning," *Adult Education Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1991): 90. In the subsequent issue of the same journal, Mezirow replies to Clark and Wilson by arguing that they misinterpreted his argument for the need for greater self-direction and autonomy of the individual in the process meaning transformation as well as his description of the ideal conditions for discourse. His argument may be valid, and his later work nuances his description of the setting for rational discourse, acknowledging the difficulty in attaining the ideal. See Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning," particularly pages 10–12. However, in the final analysis, Mezirow ignores the influence of the social context on the individual's interpretation of experience and reconstruction of meaning perspectives. For him, the ideal remains the rational individual unencumbered by outside influence and able to rationally evaluate, decide, and act. For a review of the literature related to this, see Taylor, *The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning: A Critical Review*, 25–28.

32. Particularly helpful here is Craig Dykstra's discussion of a Christian anthropology rooted in a recognition of the impact of the sin of the world and the difficulty that human beings have in seeing the world "through God's eyes." Cf. Craig R. Dykstra, *Vision and Character : A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) 33–62. While I think that it is important to nuance Dykstra's position from a more explicitly Catholic anthropology, he nonetheless provides an important critique of the generically humanist, rational approach set out by Mezirow. Other resources that can respond to the presumed anthropology of Mezirow include Craig R. Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999). and Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

33. At some level the issue of Mezirow's understanding of the role of the educator also raises the question of his lack of sufficient engagement with the issue of power. His description of critical discourse fails to account for the impact of power within communication. The power of the educator, which is always present in the educator-learner relationship whether desired or recognized by either party, is virtually ignored in Mezirow's work. The question of the role of the educator within adult faith formation is examined in a subsequent chapter.

34. Perhaps one of the most cogent presentations of this critique of Mezirow's theory is presented by Susan and Michael Law Collard, "The Limits of Perspective Transformation: A Critique of Mezirow's Theory," *Adult Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1989). For them this deficit in Mezirow's theory can be traced to his selective use of Habermas.

35. Freire's first book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, originally published in 1970, provided an important critique of the mindset that dominated much of education. His later works expanded the notion of the emancipatory role of education and the place of pedagogy in overcoming oppression. A revised edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in 1993 (New York: Continuum).
36. The appropriation of Freire's constructs and categories by adult education theorists is widespread. At minimum, one can hardly open a book on adult education theory or practice and not find "conscientization" in the index. At a more significant level, a number of theorists have struggled with the foundational contention that Freire has presented: Education is never neutral; it either domesticates or it liberates. (See Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood*, 2d ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999] 9ff.) However, I maintain that many adult educators appropriate elements of Freire without a thorough understanding of his fundamental frame of reference that personal transformation and transformation of the social structure are essentially connected. The clearest evidence of this is the ease with which some adult education theorists cite Freire and Mezirow in the same context with little indication of the differences between them. (See for example, Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults.*) Mezirow's own claim of reliance on Freire is often cited by adult education theorists with little mention of the limits of Mezirow's reading of Freire. In many ways, the differences in anthropological frameworks reflected in these two writers are significant and need to be taken into account. For a discussion of the importance of recognizing the Christian influences in Freire's work see Gillian Cooper, "Freire and Theology," *Studies in the Education of Adults* (April 1995), 27.
37. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,19.
38. Ibid., 29.
39. Ibid., 53.
40. Ibid., 53. Acknowledged but not adequately addressed in Mezirow's work is the question of power within the teacher-learner relationship. This issue will be examined in more detail in the next chapter as it raises significant implications for the relationships of power within adult faith formation.
41. What is probably the most concise and accessible description of the evolution of the concept of praxis can be found in Groome's Chapter 8 "Some Philosophical Roots for a Praxis Way of Knowing" in Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, 1st Harper & Row paperback ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).
42. John Dirkx, Phyllis Cunningham, Metchild Hart, Jack Mezirow, and Sue Scott, "Conceptions of Transformation in Adult Education: Views of Self, Society and Social Change" (Paper presented at the 34th Annual Adult Education Research Conference, University Park, 1993), 36.

4
FORMING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Several years ago, the leadership of a parish in mid-Minnesota made the decision to shift the focal point of its faith formation energy from an exclusive attention on children and youth to an inclusive focus on the entire faith community, with particular concentration on adults.[1] Over the next couple of years, a vibrant, creative, and effective process of faith formation evolved that invited all members of the parish community into a shared experience of growing in faith together. As word of it spread to the surrounding parishes, many of us involved in planning and implementing the process were asked to speak about the program and the method by which it was introduced to the parish. My role as theological and catechetical consultant to the process afforded me the opportunity to speak to a variety of people about the presumptions that guided the foundation and development of this adult approach to parish faith formation. While I tended to talk mostly about the vision and rationale, those with whom I was speaking were most interested in the programmatic issues of scheduling, topics, and timing.[2]

One of the most often asked questions was: "How long did it take to put the new program in place?" And my response went something like this: "The short answer is that it took us a just few months. By the middle of January, the parish's religious education coordinator had decided to resign at the end of the year. By the middle of April, after engaging in a national search for a religious educator who could connect with the vision and hope of the parish, it was clear that the best arrangement was to draw on the expertise of people within the parish and design an approach and model that would bring out the strengths of the parish and address its concerns and issues. By the first week in September, we inaugurated our first 'season,' and launched the parish toward a new level of growth in faith and self-understanding that would have an impact far beyond the confines of what we traditionally understood as the religious education program. That is the *short* answer. The *long* answer is that in many different ways, the parish had been preparing for the beginning of the radical shift in its perception of the task of faith formation for quite some time."

In the years preceding the introduction of an adult based model of faith formation, members of the parish had many experiences that influenced their openness to adult learning:

- When the bimonthly lector lists were mailed out, current articles addressing topics related to the lectionary or to contemporary biblical studies were regularly included.
- Each person involved in religious education—the catechists, the assistants, and even the high school "helpers"—received a subscription to a newsletter or magazine that supported them in their own faith journey as well as in their task as religious educators.
- The liturgy committee and other parish committees spent at least half an hour at the beginning of each meeting reading and discussing a recent church document or an article pertinent to their work.

- When waiting to meet with a staff member, parishioners found current copies of *U.S. Catholic, America,* the diocesan newspaper, and other reading material readily at hand.
- The process of building a parish center included regular, meaningful consultation with every level of the parish. People were encouraged to express their opinions and disagreements, arguing forcefully but respectfully for particular points of view. These insights had an impact on the design and use of the center. Several times in the process, binding votes took place at weekend liturgies.
- Finally, in the year or so leading up to the transition, people in informal conversations over coffee, and later in more structured gatherings at the parish, named and acknowledged that the model of religious education in the parish was not adequate for addressing its present and future needs.

All of these experiences, which became part of the fiber of the parish's sense of itself, contributed to its movement toward becoming a "learning community."

While I doubt that anyone (including myself) would have thought to use the term *learning community* in the early 1990s to describe this parish, it was the parish's movement toward incorporating elements of a learning community that made possible the fairly smooth transition from one perspective of parish faith formation to another. And I believe it is by giving form to dimensions of a learning community that parishes and dioceses are most able to give expression to the vision of transformative learning that shapes an adult church into an evangelizing community.

This chapter examines two related themes. The first is the concept of "learning community." Drawing on resources from business and industry that explore the notion of "learning organizations," I make applications to the reality of ministry and

parish life and propose characteristics that are at the heart of understanding faith communities as learning communities. The second theme, which closely connects with the first, is the central role of sustained critical conversation in fostering learning communities and in enhancing transformative learning. This theme has been touched on in other chapters; here I present in a more systematic way the elements of conversation and their place in adult faith formation.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS CONTEXT FOR ADULT FAITH

The clear call for adult faith formation and for the creation and strengthening of evangelizing communities is not first and foremost about creating new programs to be added onto existing parish activities.[3] In much the same way that being an evangelizing community is not primarily something a parish does but something a parish *is*, being a community that fosters adult faith is not primarily specific programs that a parish offers but the understanding of lifelong learning that permeates the entire faith community. What needs to be formed is not merely a parish with more programs but a parish that is a learning community.

Insights from Business

Over the past decade the term "learning organization" has worked its way into various aspects of business and industry.[4] Organizations as diverse as automobile manufacturers, healthcare providers, and charitable foundations have found the concept intriguing and challenging as leaders strive to effectively survive and even thrive into the future.[5] While defining *learning organization* is difficult, its fundamental point of reference is the organization as it moves into an ever changing and complex future. According to Senge:

> This, then is the basic meaning of a "learning organization"—an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. For such an organization, it is not enough merely to survive. "Survival learning" or what is most often termed "adaptive learning" is important—indeed it is necessary. But for a learning organization, "adaptive learning" must be joined by "generative learning," learning that enhances our capacity to create.[6]

As Senge indicates, the necessity for all organizations to go beyond adaptive learning to generative learning is rooted in the pace of change in a global economy. Those companies that aim to simply adapt will be left behind; the pace of change requires that organizations creatively imagine themselves into a new future.

Drawing on the work of Margaret Mead, Thomas Hawkins points out the impact of sociocultural change by drawing the distinction between "postfigurative" and "prefigurative" cultures.[7] In a postfigurative culture, the presumption is that the future is in direct continuity with the past, and that the insights and knowledge of the older generation need to be effectively and accurately passed down to subsequent ones. Given the presumed continuity, children learn a limited number of established truths from their elders and that will suffice. In a prefigurative culture, the present is seen as discontinuous with the past; new knowledge is constructed by everyone—young and old—to deal with constant change. Everyone is involved in reconstructing skills, awarenesses, and attitudes in service to enhancing the viability of the society, culture, or organization. In this context, the ongoing learning of all of the members is essential; that is, they need to take on the characteristics of a learning organization.

How does a learning organization come about? What does it look like? At the heart of the learning organization are the five disciplines that Senge argues are the core: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems think-

ing. For Senge, the fifth discipline, systems thinking, is the key and foundation for all the other disciplines.

By discipline, Senge means "a body of theory and technique that must be studied and mastered to be put into practice. A discipline is a developmental path for acquiring certain skills or competencies."[8] Senge makes clear that it is not the case that practicing these five disciplines accomplishes the goal of being a learning organization; a learning organization is not a static reality or an accomplished task.[9] One never "arrives" at being a learning organization, just as one never arrives at being a lifelong learner or an evangelizing community. Practicing the disciplines is not the end point but an opening up to the next step in the process of actively being and becoming a learning organization.

The understanding of learning organizations as set out by Senge, his associates, and others offers the religious educator and pastoral ministers in general some helpful categories for thinking about adult faith formation within the parish and diocesan "organization." At the same time, care needs to be taken whenever we appropriate insights or models from one dimension to another. While some parallels can be drawn across a diversity of organizations, there are, nonetheless, some fundamental differences between a parish and the Ford Motor Company, or Apple Computer, or a major health management organization, for example. Some of these differences have to do with the voluntary nature of one's affiliation to a parish, with the diversity of age and interests, and with multiple ways in which people understand the nature and function of parish. But the core differences have to do with what it means to be a parish and to be a community.

The Parish as Learning "Organization"

The most significant difference between corporate organizations and a parish is grounded in the rationale for striving to become a learning community. Remember that the necessity for becoming a learning organization is rooted in the rapidity of change and the importance of fostering generative learning in order to thrive. Fundamentally, the rationale is pragmatic. But beyond the pragmatic reason for shaping our parishes toward becoming learning communities—i.e., that we can respond effectively to the reality of change—there are core theological foundations for such a move.

By virtue of baptism, all Christians receive the presence of the Holy Spirit and the call to be active participants in building up the Body of Christ and fulfilling the mission of the Church. The conviction is that through initiation, all members receive gifts that are given for the good of the community, and it is incumbent on the leadership and the membership that these gifts be put to good use. Our ecclesiology, which arises from our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, affirms that wisdom and insight rest not merely with the designated leaders but within the life of the church as lived by all. So we work to foster genuine Christian learning communities not only as a practical way of effectively addressing rapid change but also because of the defining conviction that the Spirit is alive and active in all members of the community of faith.

From another perspective, it is important to speak about the Christian necessity for ongoing learning. Through initiation, the presence of the Holy Spirit is affirmed; at the same time, the call to discipleship and to apprenticeship to Jesus Christ is proclaimed.[10] In working to be faithful to this call, Christians have the responsibility to continue to grow in their faith and to continue willingly to examine the assumptions about the world that gives substance to their understanding of who they are, who God is, and how God and human beings relate. All of this is part of what it means to be a learning community of faith.

It must be noted that while it appears that we have moved seamlessly from learning *organization* to learning *community*, such a shift is not so simple. Those terms are not synonymous, and the dynamics that shape and inform an organization are not

the same for a community. Unfortunately in some of this literature these terms—*organization* and *community*—are used interchangeably and seem to be collapsed. So we can have a comment from Senge: "Once we realize that building organizations is grounded in developing leadership communities, a core question remains: How do such communities form, grow, and become influential?"[11] What is not addressed is the prior question: How are community and leadership community being defined?

Looking at the way in which "community" is described within the Christian context serves as a beginning spot. For Craig Dykstra, for example, the category of "community" serves an important role in the process of faith formation as well as character and moral development. He describes community as having historical, defining dramas, as embodying convictions, and as maintaining a language, symbol system, and forms of common action.[12] While these are central to Dykstra's notion of the role of community, it would not be difficult to find people writing about the nature of organization who would include many of these same characteristics. The question, then, is how do we characterize community?

In the quote from Senge cited above, it seems that either *team* or *group* would suffice for the word "*community*." There is more to community, however, than simply a group of people working together on a common task; perhaps this description of community is helpful:

> No one can just start a community. Community is analogous to friendship; if you work at it too directly it is not likely to happen, for its nature as gift is not honored. It takes time. A community must have accumulated a pool of significant memories, and it must have forged some compelling shared hopes.[13]

A community has a point of reference outside of itself and beyond the tasks that it intends to accomplish. Like a friendship, it has a shared vision, memories, and hopes that persist beyond a specific task.

In addition, organizations and communities have different perceptions of the role of their members. In an organization the emphasis is on keeping the organization moving smoothly and effectively. The individuals within the organization are fundamentally replaceable. When a sales manager leaves, for example, another one is hired. Although the new employee brings different gifts and may well have a significant impact over time, the learning organization nonetheless continues to exist in its general form through the replacement. The same dynamic is not true of a community, where the fundamental focus is on communication and relationship.

As we speak about the application of learning organization theory to communities of faith, it is important that we be mindful of the distinctive character of community over organization.

The Disciplines: Implications for Parish as Learning Community

Given the centrality of the five disciplines to the expression of a learning organization, it is helpful to examine the way in which they are understood within Senge's frame of reference and then to make applications to the parish setting.

When we speak of the parish as a learning community, we must remember that the referent is the entire parish membership. While the dynamics of a learning community apply particularly to the core staff and the various commissions and committees that serve the parish,[14] a learning community is based on the commitment that all members have to ongoing adult learning.

1. Personal Mastery

Senge describes personal mastery as "the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality ob-

jectively."[15] Persons who have developed this discipline well have a clear sense of naming what matters most in their lives and recognizing the core integrity of their lives. They have a sense of what they want to accomplish and are able to attain their goals. To do this, they are committed to being lifelong learners.

Personal mastery is an essential discipline in that an organization's commitment to learning is only as good as the commitment of its members. The person's commitment to lifelong learning in furthering personal goals serves as a foundation to the learning that furthers organizational goals.

As we think of the parish as learning community, the discipline of personal mastery is expressed in the ongoing challenge for all members to examine their lives and goals in terms of a dynamic sense of vocation. Here vocation is not simply about career or lifestyle but is expanded to include all of the ways in which we respond to God's invitation to partnership and faithfulness.[16] Practicing the discipline of personal mastery involves situating the day-to-day decisions a person makes about family, career, finances, and civic roles, within the broader context of the call to discipleship.

For example, the first gathering of those who have indicated an interest in serving as lectors provides the opportunity to invite them to reflect on where this ministry fits into their lives as faithful response to God's invitation. Is this simply another thing to do? Or is there a way in which participating in this ministry is a way of focusing our energies and giving expression to the gifts received in service to the large community? A parish supports the discipline of personal mastery when it provides opportunity for reflection and conversation on the fundamental understanding of the link between faith, life, and personal vision.

2. Mental Models

For Senge, mental models are those often unconsciously held assumptions or images that influence the way we understand

the world, make plans, and predict outcomes. As used by Senge, mental models can be understood as synonymous with meaning perspectives and meaning schemes as set out by Jack Mezirow in his discussion of transformative learning.[17] Like Mezirow's meaning perspectives, mental models can be considered inadequate to the degree to which they distort reality, narrow our scope of understanding, or limit our ability to anticipate consequences. The discipline of mental models involves bringing to consciousness the presumptions that we use, articulating their source and implications, and subjecting them to critical examination. We do this through engaging in "'learningful' conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others."[18]

In applying this discipline within a learning organization, Senge broadens the lens to include not simply the mental models of the individuals within the organization but the *shared* mental models that define what can and cannot be done in a particular setting, what is and is not the responsibility of a particular group, and so on. It is in articulating and examining these corporately held mental models that the organization can work together to define alternatives.

For the parish as a learning community, this discipline engages not only the specific learner (as transformative learning does)[19] but the entire community of faith. Practicing this discipline involves naming the shared mental models that shape the identity and vision of the parish. Once named, they are examined for their adequacy in supporting the continued growth and vitality of the parish. This seems to be an essential discipline in the growth of parish as learning community. When engaging in this discipline, the often tacit presumptions are brought to light and examined with the goal of defining the nature of the parish—claiming new shared mental models—in a way that is more reflective of the parish.

For example, there are a variety of ways in which the parish serves as a context where cultural, social, and economic diversity meets. The identity of a small town parish, made up primarily of German Catholics whose families have been in the area for generations, is challenged when a sizable tract of very large homes brings in people from the nearby city. In another setting, one of the parishes in an area is closed and its members are assigned to a nearby parish; the differences in priorities and ownership are clear from the start. In a city the regular influx of immigrants finding homes in the low-cost housing district creates a parish where a dozen countries and almost as many languages are represented. In each of these cases, to practice the discipline of mental models, the parish needs to step back and begin to bring to the surface the assumptions that govern its decisions and actions. Engaging in sustained conversation about the sense of parish that people maintain and the implications of that—perhaps in the context of already existing groups such as a liturgy committee or the catechists—is essential for the parish to thrive in this time of change.

3. Shared Vision

Here Senge is not speaking about a vision statement, although those can be important, but rather of a genuine vision that serves to energize and motivate all members and levels of the organization. This vision serves as a point of reference for all the decisions—small or significant—that direct the movement of the organization across time. Building a shared vision is fundamentally about creating shared meaning: "Shared meaning is a collective sense of what is important, and why."[20]

The discipline of building a shared vision involves first encouraging personal vision. Senge writes: "Shared visions emerge from personal visions. This is how they derive their energy and how they foster commitment."[21] While clearly the shared vision is not the sum total of the personal visions, it is incumbent upon the leaders to encourage the members of the organization to both influence and recognize their personal vision within the shared vision.

Conveying the shared vision to the members and teams within the organization is part of this discipline. Senge points out the different attitudes that the people in the organization may have toward a vision—from commitment (sees it not only as the shared vision but as essential to one's personal vision as well) to enrollment (more than willing to sign one's name to it but can imagine the organization without it) to compliance (accepts the vision and sees the advantages, but the vision is outside the scope of one's personal vision).[22] Moving from compliance to enrollment to commitment is at the heart of the discipline of building a shared vision.

For the parish this shared vision is rooted in the Church's fundamental mission to evangelize.[23] While the specific shape and expression of the vision will vary, a clear connection with this core mission is essential. At times the energizing vision may be around a particular element of parish life—enhancing the worship space, addressing specific social concerns, strengthening the mentoring for youth. But in the final analysis, these are always held up to the defining template of evangelization.

Even when the shared vision is clearly articulated, the process of conveying that vision in a way that elicits commitment rather than simply compliance remains the challenge. Key to this, I maintain, is fostering sustained conversation with the goal of engaging as much of the parish as one can in giving shape to the way in which the vision comes to expression. This tends to result in a higher level of commitment and, more important, serves to provide a context for drawing on the wisdom and gifts of the wider parish.

For example: Parish leadership believes that the worship space needs to be renovated. People are invited to town meetings to discuss the options. A large committee is formed to do

the necessary planning for the renovation itself, but first they attend to ways to engage the rest of the parish. A process of lectures, small discussion groups, and informal discussions over coffee after liturgies is established. The immediate result is to heighten and bring to the surface some tensions and disagreements over prioritizing the needs of the parish. The long-range effect is to strengthen the sense of parish identity and the conviction that the parishioners have the right and responsibility to engage in the decision-making process. The renovation is put on hold while other issues are examined.

4. Team Learning

As we attempt to name the dynamics of a learning organization, team learning is vital because, as Senge points out, "teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where 'the rubber meets the road'; unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn."[24] At the heart of this discipline is mastering the capacity for dialog and discussion and dealing effectively with those forces within the team and outside it that work against productive dialog and discussion.

Dialog, discussion, conversation, debate, discourse: these terms and others point to modes of communication, each having its own focus and goal. While further attention is given to "critical conversation" in the later part of this chapter, it is helpful to draw out the distinction and relationship that Senge and his associates make between productive dialog and learningful discussion.

The purpose of dialog, as Senge understands it, is establishing a context where "collective mindfulness" can be created and maintained.[25] It is the gathering of ideas, insights, and experiences around a particular topic, but not with the goal of coming to a conclusion or solving a problem. The goal of dialog is to enhance the group's way of entering into a topic and to strengthen the members' ability to learn as a team. Productive dialog is dependent on the participants' willingness to engage

in attentive listening, to look favorably on the positions or ideas of the other, and to name and examine the presumptions or (mental models) that shape their thinking. Dialog, as understood here, is in service to the pooling of common meaning and collective interpretation.

Discussion is the necessary complement to dialog in the dynamics of team learning. In discussion, positions are set out and defended, alternatives are proposed and examined, and some common agreement on a decision is reached in the end. Effective discussion is characterized by a balance of advocacy and inquiry, that is presenting one's position as well as asking questions of others in order better to grasp their position and bring them to further clarity and cohesiveness.[26]

Recognizing the differences and relationship between dialog and discussion is an essential discipline in team learning. Teams can do this effectively only with extended opportunity for practice.

For the parish there are often few times in which teams—parish council, social justice committee, team of people coordinating some aspect of catechesis—have the opportunity to practice either dialog or learningful discussion. Meetings and gatherings are often highly task-oriented and have agendas that are too long to allow for sustained discussion. One of the consequences of this is that there is no shared vocabulary or meaning, much less common vision and mental models. Establishing a rhythm for all groups that allows for generative dialog and genuine discussions is crucial.

For example, each year the first meeting of the newly constituted parish council is a Sunday afternoon retreat. It begins with the parish liturgy, setting the context of all of the group's meetings within the Eucharist. The agenda for the afternoon is simply to name the positive events that have shaped the parish, the Council, and the members over the past year. In the course of this, participants have the opportunity to engage in dialog with one or two others. Basic characteristics of effective, learn-

ingful discussion are reviewed and "practiced" throughout the retreat. The result of this gathering is the foundation of a common set of memories, experiences, and mental models that serves the group well as it moves into the year.

5. Systems Thinking

Designated the "fifth discipline," systems thinking is the essential foundation for all the other disciplines and the conceptual cornerstone of a learning community. Senge describes systems thinking in this way: "Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots.'" He concludes, "And systems thinking is a sensibility—for the subtle interconnectedness that gives living systems their unique character."[27]

A variety of themes coalesce around this discipline of systems thinking; two of them are particularly helpful for our work. The first is the concept of feedback. Given the interrelated nature of any system, actions which we tend to see in a straight line cause-and-effect relationship are in fact part of larger circles in which actions can reinforce or counteract each other; this is the essence of feedback.[28] It is the ever broadening recognition of multiple feedback circles that enable us to see the complexity of the systems within which we function. It also provides a tool for looking beyond the "easy fix" and instead situating the problem within its larger feedback circle.

A second theme that is at the heart of systems thinking is "dynamic complexity." This describes the situations in which the predicted cause-and-effect relationship is subtle and when the long-term outcome of an action is not clear. Senge writes:

> When the same action has dramatically different effects in the short run and the long, there is dynamic complexity. When an action has one set of consequences locally and a very different set of consequences in another part of the system, there is dynamic complexity. When obvious interventions produce nonobvious consequences, there is dynamic complexity.[29]

For the parish, systems thinking has significant implications. To approach the parish as learning community from the perspective of systems thinking involves moving away from a "silo" approach to parish life. In many contexts the various aspects of the parish-—youth ministry, liturgy, school, action for justice, religious education, and so on—are seen as discrete units of the whole that exist side by side but without much interaction. Systems thinking invites and even requires that the interconnection among the various aspects and dimensions of parish life be recognized and that the gifts of all the people be utilized.

For example, the concept of dynamic complexity is helpful when we look at the parish. One of the indicators of dynamic complexity is that there is a difference between the short- and long-term effects of an action. While making sessions for parents in the Eucharist program mandatory may in the short term lead to more adults attending, the long-term effect is to work against the recognition of the role of adult learners in their own learning/formation. While having really engaging speakers who come in with "package presentations" that entertain may in the short run provide for an enjoyable evening, the lack of opportunity for adults to engage with each other around issues of faith leads to a diminishment of the ongoing task of bringing faith into dialog with life. In the short run taking time to study a document in a parish committee means that not as much seems to be getting done. But the long-term impact is to contribute to the creation of a learning community that more effectively incorporates everyone's ideas and insights into the work of the committee. In each of these contexts the dynamic complexity of the learning community requires that we continually rearticulate our vision and respond in a way that furthers it.

While care needs to be taken when applying theoretical frameworks from other contexts to the life and work of the

parish, it is clear that there are many elements from learning organizations theory that are helpful and challenging for us. In reviewing the five disciplines and their applicability to the life of the parish, one of the themes that comes to the fore is the centrality of conversation to all effective learning. Senge writes:

> Learning organizations are spaces for generative conversations and concerted action. In them, language functions as a device for connection, invention, and coordination. People can talk from their hearts and connect with one another in the spirit of dialogue. Their dialogue weaves a common fabric and connects them at a deep level of being. When people talk and listen to each other this way, they create a field of alignment that produces tremendous power to invent new realities in conversation, and to bring about these new realities in action.[30]

The nature and dynamics of conversation and its place in the work of adult faith formation is the topic for the next section of this chapter. But first, an invitation to engage in reflection and conversation yourself:

FOR YOUR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. What ideas or insights into the nature and functioning of your parish did you glean from this discussion of learning organizations? To what extent do you think the theory of learning organizations is a helpful or applicable one for parish communities?
2. While it is clear that the five disciplines are closely connected, which one seems most important to you as you think about forming a learning community? What elements are present in some form within the parish already?

3. In light of this material, what conviction or commitment about the dynamics of forming an adult church as an evangelizing community have come clear for you?

CONVERSATION AS CENTRAL TO AN ADULT CHURCH

Senge argues clearly that systems thinking is the foundational discipline and the cornerstone of a learning organization; the ability to recognize the feedback circles and the impact of dynamic complexity are crucial for a person, a team, or an organization to learn. While systems thinking is the essential discipline for forming a learning organization, I contend that the essential skill is the ability to engage in sustained critical conversation. It is sustained, critical conversation that makes possible the practice and promotion of the other disciplines. And it is sustained, critical conversation that is constitutive to forming an adult, evangelizing Church.

In this section we look more closely at the nature, dynamics, and role of conversation. Given the central place that conversation holds in my conception of an adult Church, it is evident that the referent for conversation is not the pleasantries we pass with a co-worker while waiting for the coffee to brew, nor the exchange within the family about the events of the day. Conversation as I speak of it here is not even necessarily the late-night interchanges we have with close friends about politics, religion, or the meaning of life. Conversation in this sense takes on specific characteristics. To examine those more closely, we draw on the insights of hermeneutics and particularly the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Following the explication of the concept of conversation, we can draw out some of the core characteristics of conversa-

tion that have particular relevance to the task of catechesis and the work of being and becoming an adult, evangelizing Church. We conclude this chapter by naming some of the significance of this for adult faith formation.

Insights from Hermeneutics

> We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it.[31]

With these words, Gadamer opens up a lengthy discussion of the nature and dynamics of conversation that invites us to look more closely at the way in which we come to know and to understand.

What does conversation look like from Gadamer's perspective? In some way we can say that it begins before the conversation itself is under way. In approaching the conversation—whether that is a conversation with another person, with a text, with a piece of art, and so on[32]—we bring with us our prior conceptions, prior knowledge, and prior understanding.[33] These preunderstandings serve to provide the initial meaning to the conversation.

For example, a student comes to me after receiving a fairly poor grade on a mid-term. Since I have met before with students with low grades, I bring my preunderstandings to the encounter. I know what he is going to say—or I think I know, in any case. These become my interpretive frame for beginning the conversation. When he sits down to begin the conversation, I enter into it from the perspective of my interpretive world. Shaped by my past experiences, in this case my past interactions with students, my preunderstandings make it possible to enter into the conversation. I come with preunderstandings that this conversation will be meaningful, that it will focus on a specific topic, and that my role as teacher will be a defining characteristic of the interchange.

While at times those preunderstandings are unhelpful in that they prevent me from understanding the other person, they are, however, essential for the act of interpretation. They serve as the entry point into the "hermeneutical circle." As I begin the conversation, I engage the world of the other person through the lens of my prejudices. The student who initiated the conversation comes with his own preunderstandings and the topic that he is hoping to discuss as well. In genuine conversation, I allow my preunderstandings to be influenced and challenged by the points and insights of the other person. In the conversation with the student, for it to be a genuine conversation, I will need to be open to setting aside my prejudices (preunderstandings) and attend to the world of the student. When that happens, I run the risk of having my preunderstandings challenged; what I thought I knew to be true about the student, about myself, and about the topic we are discussing may turn out to be not true. As this happens, the interpretive circle is completed—my encounter within the conversation has enhanced or challenged or confirmed my interpretive world, adding layers and depth to my next encounter. My preunderstandings both limit and make possible the conversation that I have with another; and that conversation enhances, challenges, colors, or confirms the world of understanding shaped by my experience.

What is the significance of all this? How does it provide insight to how conversation takes place and the role it plays in faith formation? Let me make three points about the nature of conversation from this discussion.

First, in conversation the process of coming to understanding is dependent upon the "back-and-forthness" of the conversation partners.[34] Two parents are talking about the level of education in the children's school. Both use the term *basics*, as in

"being sure the children know the basics." At the outset of the conversation, both come in with a preunderstanding of what that term means and what it implies; each simply presumes that the other person understands and interprets the word in the same way. A passing comment to one another and both parents leave content in their conviction that they share a common sense of the basics. It is only in the extended conversation, where one person gives examples of what he means and the other responds with a similar or contrary comment, that the two parents are confirmed in or disavowed of their presumption that the other held a similar position.

Second, while in conversation, my first responsibility is to understand the other and to assist the other in understanding me. Gadamer writes: "Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says."[35] There is a listening and a truly speaking that is an essential dynamic of this mode of conversation. I listen with the presumption that the point being made, the position being presented, the insight being articulated make sense and are valid. To the degree to which they do not make sense or do not seem valid, I am caught up short and compelled to look more closely, to name what I am missing in order to gain the understanding that I seek of the other's point of view.

Finally, in light of the first two observations, conversation as it is described here is risky. At one level, self-disclosure in order to assure that the other person comes to understand my point of view is always risky: I may be dismissed or rejected, my ideas may be ridiculed or labeled heretical. But what is at risk in genuine conversation is not merely my pride or standing. The risk of genuine conversation is that I may have to change my thinking. For genuine conversation to take place I need to do more than suspend my presumption that the other thinks the same way I do, or if that proves not to be the case, that the other is probably wrong. I need also to suspend my presumption that I am right!

In a way that brings together many of the elements we have discussed thus far, David Tracy, whose understanding of conversation builds on Gadamer's insights, writes:

> Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinion if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.[36]

Characteristics of Conversation

Bringing the insights from Gadamer and others concerning conversation into accessible discourse is essential. We have set out what the conversation looks like and named three dynamics that are at its core. We can now bring this one step further by proposing three characteristics that would support this type of conversation particularly in its application to adult faith formation. The conversation needs to be sustained, critical, and marked by mutual respect and trust.[37]

Sustained Conversation

Conversation is "sustained" in two ways: first, in the sense that the amount of time for each conversation is long enough to allow a genuine exploration of ideas; and second, in the sense that the opportunity for conversation is ongoing and an integral part of each gathering of adults. That is, the conversation often continues over a significant period of time and over more than one occasion. This allows for the "back-and-forthness" of a conversation mentioned earlier, which leads to genuine under-

standing. In addition, it allows the conversation partners to circle back to a topic explored at an earlier time, bringing new insights to bear.

One of the important results of a sustained conversation is that we are able to move beyond the first level of common understanding and polite agreement and truly engage with the differences that are present in any community of faith.[38] In sustained conversation, we have the opportunity to encounter the "otherness" in those with whom we converse. Sustained conversation allows the participants to move through a series of phases that can be described in this way: (1) We use the same words so we must mean the same thing—we have a lot in common; (2) She (or he) uses similar words to mean a very different thing—we have nothing in common; (3) She (or he) uses words to convey the convictions and values that shape his (or her) view of the world—we have much to share and learn from each other.

In addition, sustained conversation gives participants the opportunity to give expression to their convictions, concerns, and questions. I am convinced that one of the reasons that adults are hesitant to talk with others—including their children—about their faith is because they do not have the practice. Understood in this way, conversation helps to clarify our perspective (in being heard, we hear reflected back to us what we said) and provides alternative perspectives against which to examine our own presumptions and convictions. Essential for authentic conversation is allowing our way of seeing and understanding the world to be put at risk by exposure to the difference expressed by others.

Critical Conversation

It is the recognition of difference that serves as a key context for critical conversation. Difference and otherness opens up the possibility of our seeing the world differently. "It is only in allowing our world to be provoked by a questioning that risks

the familiar that our world can be enlarged into new possibilities."[39] It is in critical conversation that difference and otherness is disclosed.

Here the focus of conversation is not only the "content," that is, the tradition, the lived experiences of the individuals and the ongoing life of the parish community. In critical conversation, the focus is also on the presumptions or perspectives that make that content meaningful and significant. It is in the critical nature of the conversation that transformative catechesis is possible.

A connection can be made between this discussion of the nature of critical conversation and the work of Jack Mezirow on transformative learning. Mezirow's three levels of reflection—content, process, and premise reflection—can be applied as aspects of the critical conversation. Using Mezirow's categories, critical conversation goes beyond, though it often builds on, questions relating to content, leading to conversation "on what we perceive, think, feel or act upon."[40] It also includes but goes beyond questions related to *process*, which ask about how we came to the particular knowledge, belief, or feeling that we have. Critical conversation moves the focus to the reason, or premise, why the conversation is important. Why is this relevant? In responding to these questions, the conversation enters into the dynamics of transformative learning, in which the meaning perspectives of those involved are named and examined. It is often in conversation with those whose views of the world are different from our own that we can begin to recognize the distortions in our own meaning perspective.[41]

At the heart of transformative learning is the critical examination of the meaning perspectives and meaning schemes upon which our interpretation of experiences are based. Transformative learning involves critically reflecting on these assumptions, recognizing those that are inadequate, and revising them as needed. This is a challenging task because at the heart of meaning perspective distortion is a lack of awareness that we have made

an assumption and that that assumption could be questioned. It is primarily in the context of sustained critical conversation that we are able to gain insight into our own meaning perspectives.

A Context of Mutual Respect and Trust

The critical conversation and transformation of meaning perspectives can take place only in a context of mutual respect and trust. This is where the risk of critical conversation comes in—the risk of having your meaning perspectives challenged and thus be required to re-create your meaning-making framework. It is here that the need for attentive listening and careful speaking is required.

In describing the elements of conversation that support mutual respect and trust, Cowan points to the importance of "intentional, disciplined, temporary suspension of concern with one's own position."[42] This does not indicate agreement, but it does set the foundation for a relationship of openness and trust that is essential if the conversation is going to move beyond the initial interchange. And it is this context of trust that makes effective, sustained, critical conversation possible,

Conversation Toward an Evangelizing Church

My contention is that conversation stands as the preferred mode for engaging in the work of catechesis designed to foster an adult community of faith that embraces the call to be an evangelizing Church. The preceding description of conversation sets out for us the direction in which we hope to move when structuring and facilitating conversation with adults. Few of us engage in that level of discourse with much regularity; the challenge of communicating effectively with family and friends around the mundane busyness of life is sufficient. In fact, few adults within the parish communities have the opportunity to engage in sustained critical conversation with other adults about things that matter. Many have seldom, if ever, been invited to talk with other adults about

the content of their faith, much less the process by which they came to believe what they believe. In whatever ways we can and every time we can, we have a responsibility to provide opportunity for adults to engage in meaningful conversation.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. In what way is the image of conversation a helpful one for you? In what ways does it open up your understanding of the work of catechesis?
2. "Adults grow in their faith when they have the opportunity to be in sustained, crucial conversation with other adults about things that matter." Do you agree? Disagree? What question or caution might you want to add to that statement?
3. What conviction or commitment concerning the role of conversation in adult faith formation do you bring from this chapter?

NOTES

1. The opportunity I had to serve as consultant to the creation and development of an adult-based model that was introduced in the fall of 1990 to the Church of St. Paul in St. Cloud, Minnesota, was one of the most invigorating and vision-transforming experiences of my professional life. GIFT (Growing in Faith Together) played a significant role in enhancing the faith life of the members of the parish and in strengthening the identity and unity of the parish.
2. See the discussion in Chapter 5 about the relationship among vision, presumptions, structures, and programs in the process of facilitating adult faith formation at the parish level.
3. See the discussion in Chapter 1 that looks at the call to evangelization as fundamental to the mission of the Church and foundational to understanding the necessity for adult catechesis. Because the Church exists to evangelize, it is of paramount importance that the ongoing formation of the adult community be seen "as the central task in the catechetical enterprise." See Interna-

tional Council for Catechesis, *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community: Some Principles and Guidelines* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1992).

4. The popularity of the term is generally traced back to the publication of Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990).

5. Several of the core resources concerning learning organizations cited in this chapter include many examples of companies and other organizations that have worked to form learning organizations.

6. Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 14.

7. Thomas R. Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation: A New Vision of Leadership* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997) 12–13.

8. Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 10.

9. In an essay reviewing the literature regarding learning organizations, Michael Wonacott points to the debate that exists about the nature of learning organization. For several people writing in the field, learning organization is seen as a concept that is more rhetorical than actual; it serves primarily as an ideal toward which an organization is moving. Wonacott goes on to say, "A common bump in the road to implementation is the idea that the learning organization is a finished product that can be attained, and quickly. This idea is doomed to failure because the learning organization is a developing ability to conduct a continual process—learning, over the long term." Michael E. Wonacott, *The Learning Organization: Theory and Practice* [Internet] (ERIC/ACVE, 2000 [cited 2 Feb. 1, 2001]); available from http://ericacve.org/docgex.asp?tbl=mr&ID=102.

10. The call to apprenticeship that is inherent to initiation is examined briefly in Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (*GDC*) (Washington DC: USCC, 1997). See Chapter 1 for a discussion of this.

11. Peter M. Senge, "Creating Quality Communities," in *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning*, ed. Kazimierz Gozdz (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995), 53.

12. Craig R. Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 55–57.

13. Michael Downey, "Community," in *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).

14. This is examined more specifically in Chapter 7 when those who are engaged in leadership are invited to reflection and conversation about the dynamics of leadership for change.

15. Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 7.

16. The understanding of vocation that is expressed by James Fowler points to the sense I have here: "Vocation is the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling to partnership. The shaping of vocation as total response of the self to the address of God involves the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and the resources we steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God's purposes in the service of God and the neighbor." James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 95.

17. Mezirow describes meaning perspectives as "a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience." Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 42. As an adult educator, Jack Mezirow places at the center of the educational endeavor the work of transformative learning. This learning involves becoming aware of one's meaning perspectives, evaluating them for their adequacy and making changes in them as needed. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the various forms of meaning perspectives and the process of transforming them.

18. Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 9.

19. See the discussion of this throughout Chapter 3 where the process of transformative learning involves naming one's meaning perspective and uncovering its influence on how we see and understand the world.

20. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (New York: Currency, 1994), 299.

21. Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 211.

22. Ibid., 219–20.

23. See the discussion of evangelization in Chapter 1.

24. Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 10.

25. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, 359. The concept of dialog appears in many sections of the writings related to learning organizations. Particularly helpful are the fairly sustained theoretical presentation in Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 238–49; the discussion of the process for setting up dialog sessions in Senge, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, 374–81. Also Glenna and Linda Teurfs Gerard, "Dialogue and Organizational Learning," in *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning*, ed. Kazimierz Gozdz (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995).

26. For a discussion of the relationship between advocacy and inquiry see Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 253–59.

27. Ibid., 68–69.

28. Ibid., 73–83.

29. Ibid., 71.

30. Senge, "Creating Quality Communities," 50.

31. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1999), 381.

32. Much of Gadamer's work deals with interpretation of texts, particularly the classical. Conversation with its common connotation of interchange with another person or persons is used as a metaphor to examine the way in which interpretation takes place. For the sake of our discussion, I am limiting the

focus to interpersonal conversation, as that is the primary (though not exclusive) interest in speaking about conversation in the context of catechesis and adult faith formation.

33. Gadamer uses the word *prejudices* to describe these preunderstandings or fore-conceptions. In doing this he is attempting to reclaim the reality of prejudice in the interpretive process. That is, he is arguing against the Enlightenment position that it is possible to take an objective stance in the task of interpretation and remove one's prejudices from the equation. It is in fact our preunderstandings that make meaning possible in the first place. Gadamer and some of his contemporaries argue that there is no place from which to interpret that does not include our preunderstandings. The best we can do is bring those preunderstandings to the table of conversation and see them as they are. For a discussion of the understanding of fore-structure in light of Heidegger's contribution see *Truth and Method* 265–71. This is developed further in Gadamer's discussion of conversation (383 ff.).

34. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1987), 11.

35. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 385.

36. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 19.

37. Elements of this have been developed in other contexts. See particularly Jane Regan, "When Is Catechesis of Adults Genuinely Adult?" *The Living Light* 37 (2000), 1.

38. Research into the way in which communities grow and evolve gives additional support to the necessity of sustained conversation. Communities begin in a perhaps haphazard way—neighboring homes, children in the same school, members of the same church. Our need to belong, to feel connected, serves to bring this community together. At the next phase, we recognize and celebrate our commonalties. The connections, while growing, are nonetheless at a level where the members are still attempting to define themselves and their place. The final phase is rooted in a mutual sharing of differences. While the phases may be designated with different labels, the researchers agree that the move to the final phase represents the focused, persistent work of sustained conversation. See for example, George Land and Beth Jarman, "Beyond Breakpoint: Possibilities for New Community," in *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning*, ed. Kazimierz Gozdz (San Francisco: New Leaders Press, 1995).

39. Terry Veiling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1995) 59.

40. Jack Mezirow. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 101.

41. See also Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 168–79.

42. Michael A. Cowan, "The Sacred Game of Conversation," *Furrow* 44 (1993): 30–34.