

What Is Christian Education?



Before selecting materials, congregations may want to wrestle with the question, what is Christian education? Answering this basic query helps churches address such important questions as: Why do we offer Christian education? How can we do it well? When and where are opportunities to educate for faith? What tools do we need?

Current language for Christian education encourages congregations to engage in making meaning in every situation. Professors of religious education call this reflective process “information for transformation.” Others name it “discipleship” or “faith formation” through spiritual practices. “Lifelong learning” is another term for the dynamic ministry of passing on a living faith. The process of educating for faith is an experience rich with opportunities to be, to know, and to live.

A key element in the conversation may be less attention on what education is called and more on defining what it means and how to do it well. Definitions take shape by addressing long discussed and often unresolved ideas. Is faith caught or taught? Most educators would say yes to both. Does education happen in formal or informal settings? Yes, again: education takes place in all settings. How about the content of what we teach versus the context? Being mindful of both content and context is paramount for quality education. Does education happen intentionally, or should we focus on unintentional ways we teach and learn at church? Experts remind us to pay close attention to what people learn that we did not plan to teach.

Charles Foster, in his book *Educating Congregations*, defined it this way: “The congregation is the context, and its mission—to praise God and serve neighbors—the impetus for Christian religious education.”¹ By this definition, all of education in “the way” is for the sake of the “transformation of the world.” Maria Harris, in dialogue with Gabriel Moran in *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice*, quotes C. Ellis Nelson, “A congregation embodies the tradition of Christian faith and, through corporate lives, communicates the meaning of faith to the next generation by the way they worship and live together.”² Education is not indoctrination, but teaching people how to practice what it means to be a Christian.

Usually we think of education this way: hear a story and remember the facts. Christian education today begins with someone telling a Bible story and then asking powerful questions. Can we love as Jesus loved? Does

God ask me to be obedient like Abram and Sarai? Are we called to feel Christ’s sheep? If so, what does this mean for us? The model of teaching is Jesus’ model, but Jesus also taught while he healed the sick or as he moved away from the crowd to pray. We learn through his example and by our own experience.

Christian education in its best form focuses on the result. Churches help individuals know what it means to be a Christian, guide people to tell God’s story in relation to their own story, and prepare members to hear God’s call to go and serve. Congregations help learners hunger for faith-filled conversations around Scripture and lives of faithful action.

Parents promising to be the child’s spiritual teacher; teachers living their passion for the Bible; pastors building up the body of Christ; congregations providing communities for people to practice and grow. Everyone wants to know what it means to educate for all of life. They are asking, “What is Christian education?” For tools and resources to evaluate and plan your educational ministry, visit pcusa.org/education.

“Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of age.”

—Matthew 28: 19–20
The Message

1. Charles Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994)

2. Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1998)

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