

FIFTEEN GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATIONAL EDUCATION

DELORES CARPENTER¹

ABSTRACT

Although all areas of theological discourse can be encouraged, this article focuses upon the need for an in depth appreciation and analysis of the message and mission of Jesus Christ. This undertaking leads directly into the mission-oriented framework that is being suggested.

Introduction

Christian education is an opportunity to pass wisdom, knowledge and ethical principles from one member of a community to another or from one group to another group. It is often referred to as faith formation. It involves religious beliefs and human values that inspire hope for a more just and virtuous future under the watchful eye of the Divine. It is an awesome task with a great reward. Whether nurturing the very young, or teaching the elementary children or helping teenagers develop their thinking capacities or encouraging adults to ask the next best questions, its significance is hard to measure. Meaning-making, identity, vocation, and social justice are all part of the exploration towards universal humanization. The making of a better world populated by people who are richer in faith and virtue is a goal for the advancement of civilization.

¹ Dr. Delores Carpenter is Associate Professor in Christian Education at Howard University School of Divinity. Additionally, she has served as the senior pastor of Michigan Park Christian Church in Washington, D.C., for more than 20 years.

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

Leaving a legacy that provides a better life for the next generation goes beyond economic and political improvement. It includes ethics, spirituality and character development. Today that larger picture embraces efforts toward closing the disparities between the haves and the have-nots globally. Thus, education must keep such context in view as it sets the curriculum for individuals, families, and congregations. Essential Christian principles are at the heart of Christian education. They must be taught, internalized, appropriated to life applications, and bring students to ethical decisions for future actions. Christian education must inform and inspire, illuminate and motivate with an intentionality of helping people decide upon what to do next. Those who facilitate Christian education offer an invitation for others to join them on this never-ending journey. The whole congregation educates, not just the 20% who participate in structured Christian education events, programs and activities. In the study, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*, Benson and Eklin (1990) offer twelve useful recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of overall educational ministries. This study included an ethnic oversample to ensure that the number of African American congregations was significant. He discusses twelve points in Part 4 of his recording for Promoting Faith Maturity:

- a. Collect information in your own congregation. You need to know how many adults, adolescents, children and parents are involved in Christian Education. Next you need to assess what are the interests and needs of your parishioners and where are your people *vis-a-vis* faith maturity. You then need to look to see what you can learn about the successes of what other congregations are doing.
- b. Help people build relationship skills to express warmth and care. Teach them how to listen.

DELORES CARPENTER

- c. Promote a thinking climate-stretch and expand their comprehension of spirituality, ethics, values, interpretations of Scripture, and social issues.
- d. Build global awareness that is responsive and responsible.
- e. Promote intergenerational contact-connect older persons to the young.
- f. Coordinate themes across age groups.
- g. Place emphasis upon parent education-help parents become teachers of values.
- h. Nurture, support and train teachers. They need help.
- i. Promote the horizontal dimension of the faith. Help persons live out their faith in the world through service to the community, nation, and social issues.
- j. Expect educational involvement more than Sunday morning. Help members to see the congregation as a learning center.
- k. Encourage the pastor's involvement and his or her continuing education in Christian education. During the pastoral search, ask candidates what competence and commitment they have toward the educational ministry.
- l. Respect diversity. People are in different places. Lead them to be in dialogue and interaction with other people who have different perspectives.

African American Christian Education Writings

Prominent among African American Christian education writings are Ella Mitchell's (1986) emphasis upon the orality of black Christian education, including Sunday school, storytelling, music, dance and proverbial sayings, in her publication, *Oral Tradition: Legacy of Faith for the Black Church*. In *New Roads to Faith Filmstrip*, Yvonne Delk's work stresses the importance of acknowledging the African roots of

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

African American spirituality and the proactive outcomes of black Christian education. For her, Christian education ends with the question of what we need to be doing. In *Teaching Scripture from an African American Perspective*, Joseph Crockett (1990) used the Scriptural metaphors of exile, exodus, and sanctuary to embrace the study of the Bible and the search for identity and vocation through story-telling. He paralleled exile with heritage, tradition and God's loving care and call to Christian community. He paralleled exodus with a unique missional, justice, and social engagement responsibility.

In *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* Anne Wimberly (2005) proposes story-linking as an effective process for African American Christian education. Students, seeking vocation, liberation and wisdom, have woven together their everyday stories along with biblical stories and heritage stories from African American history. South African Bishop Desmond Tutu offered "ubuntu" as a way to dialogue toward reconciliation, calling forth a unified self in the struggle to live into the vision of the Beloved Community. Charles Foster and Fred Smith (2003) in *Black Religious Education: Conversations on Double Consciousness and the Work of Grant Shockley*, states that it is a process that does not take sides, but moves beyond liberation theology toward reconciliation. Foster and Smith call on African American Christian education to help persons create coherence in the face of incoherence and to develop in persons the capacities for liberation from oppression. They also stress reconciliation with God and the human family, participation with God in the transformation of the world, and being the Kingdom of God as human communities whose conscience is imbued with love. They emphasize the role of the transcendence and empowering metaphors in everyday living. A bibliography of Afrocentric resources (2002) is developed and published by the *Committee on Black Congregational Ministries of Christian Education Division of the National Council of*

DELORES CARPENTER

Churches. Many other African American Christian education materials are included.

To this illustrative foundation I offered the mission-oriented framework for African American Christian education that attends to five essential dimensions: the climate/relational, the biblical theological, the cognitive/thinking, the interpersonal/group process, and the cultural/heritage. In *The Purpose, Office, and Goals of Congregational Education: A Mission-Oriented Framework* (1991), I outlined the first four dimensions to which the fifth, the cultural and heritage dimension, has been added.

The Purpose of Christian Education

The purpose of Christian education is: first to guide individuals, families, and groups through a nurturing, maturing and increasingly self-initiating journey toward God, through Jesus Christ and on behalf of others. Persons learn to love God, which implies a prior belief regarding God and God's love-provoking nature. Secondly, they are taught to listen to God, which implies grounding in Scripture as the Word of God, church history, religious biography, and a spiritual filtering lens through which they learn to "read" their own experiences.

The life of Jesus is viewed by Christians as the supreme "for instance" of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the internal standard and lens which deciphers God's messages and God's meaning. Thirdly, each believer/lover/discerned of God's ways becomes obedient to an action plan which God reveals to her or him. This shapes and frames the disciples' vocation, which always revolves around a mission that contributes to the ultimate mission of bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. Vocation and mission have both a personal and corporate dimension, for each is revealed and achieved by individuals working with others in community. Further, Christian education leads persons and groups toward a fuller understanding of who they are, how to

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

live a Christian life, and what Christians are called to do in today's world. One's neighbor includes persons around the globe. To love one's neighbor, as the Golden Rule mandates, is to be overwhelmed at times by the vastness of societal problems. The current media bombards its audiences with an informational explosion that can be unsettling. One can sit at home and visually experience the plight of those in need on a regular basis. To consider "the least of these" is an awesome task which Christian education tackles.

It takes tremendous faith to believe that any relatively small group of individuals can make a difference in this world. Social media can connect individuals around a common cause. And this is what the gospel demands, not powerlessness in the face of poverty and injustice, but rather the hope that together those who care can make a significant impact upon carving out alternative realities. The hope is that we ever bring the world closer to the Kingdom of God, as taught by Jesus Christ. Teaching the faith is more like initiating persons into the identity, worldview, and values of a culture. It is like schooling in the sense of formal didactic instruction, but much more. It is what happens in the faith community and the interpretation of what the institutional traditions and rituals mean. It combines individual spirituality with institutional memory. It is not static but an ever unfolding interaction of the past, the present and the future. It is conserving, liberating, and transforming at the same time. Thus, the most realistic place to situate the goals of Christian education is in the midst of the multigenerational interaction of the faith community.

To explain how goals are identified, this article identifies and defines the dimensions which give rise to Christian education goals. After reviewing the literature in the field of Christian education, and based upon practical experience in African American congregational life and leadership, five dimensions are presented here. These five dimensions are: 1) the cultural/heritage dimension, 2) the

DELORES CARPENTER

climate/relational dimension, 3) biblical/theological dimension, 4) the cognitive/thinking dimension, and finally 5) the interpersonal/group process. These dimensions give rise to the goals for adults, adolescents and children, that when achieved, empower the faith community to achieve its mission. There are many workbooks that can help each congregation assess the needs and interests of its congregants. What appears here are the broader strokes of what makes for a balanced curriculum?

Each of these dimensions contributes to a comprehensive view of religious education. The five dimensions seek to overcome two distinctive and historically dichotomous strands. One is the devotional, confessional strand and the other the analytic, praxis strand. Both are important and require head, heart and hands. Taken together, the dimensions propose a community-based model of Christian education which places the emphasis upon mission. Christian education seeks to continue both the message and the mission of Jesus Christ. Common understandings and interpretations will lead the community to advocate for social justice.

The Cultural/Heritage Dimension

African American congregations have a unique responsibility to continue in the tradition of early eighteenth century religious educators who inspired African Americans to reach beyond the constraints of racial discrimination to discover a connection to and an awareness of the Divine and a higher destiny for their lives. Beginning with England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to the efforts of the Society of Friends to prepare slaves for the enjoyment of freedom, religious instruction was central to the task. The educational activities of the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and the Sunday School movement have been documented in Delores Carpenter's (1996) article,

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

'Religious Education,' in the *Encyclopedia of African American History and Culture*. Carpenter (1996) states that the Christian Endeavor Movement and the Work of the Congregational Church, as well as the Catholic Church, are part of this list.

Finally, Black churches built large and effective Sunday Schools and youth departments in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Educational departments gave rise to improvement societies and equal opportunity committees. Religious education efforts included voter registration and literacy training throughout the South. Religious education joined forces with the modern civil rights struggle in 1960. Projects in Black history, Black church history and Saturday ethnic schools emerged across the nation. One example is the Children's Defense Fund's Summer Freedom Schools. A movement to produce Christian educational materials that included black images and even the black Jesus movement led to the development of more relevant teaching materials and curricula. By the 1980, publishing houses began to develop Christian education materials designed to meet the needs of African Americans. One example is Urban Ministries in Chicago that caters exclusively to African American urban markets. The presence of Blacks in the Bible and Black writers gained popularity within the Black church.

African American heritage studies help African American gain a sense of identity and racial pride. One outstanding approach to teaching heritage stories is the storytelling methodology as forth by Anne Wimberly. Her model follows in the tradition of the African American religious education writers cited above. One of the most important roles for heritage studies is to dispel many of the myths and stereotypes portrayed in the media and taught in secular schools that exclude black history and fail to affirm the cultural strengths of African Americans. It is necessary to reinforce and expand upon the knowledge base of black history. In fact,

DELORES CARPENTER

it should be taught in the church every Sunday, not just during Black History month.

References to Black history should be prominent in all phases of African American worship. The sermon, music, moment with children and jumbo screens should contain reminders of the journey of African Americans in a hostile and racist society. This equips Black people to persevere in the face of adversity and explains why the pathway to freedom and liberation is often difficult, referred as “stony the road we trod” in the African American National Anthem.

Carpenter (2001) edited the *African American Heritage Hymnal*. In the front of the hymnal appears an outline of unified Black liturgy consisting of 52 litanies that comprise a systematized, intentional Black Church Year. These litanies incorporate much of the standard church year emphases but in addition to entries like Advent and Lent, every Sunday focuses upon an important part of black history and culture. In addition, there are Biblical responsive readings that establish a lectionary of favorite, powerful Biblical texts. A forth-coming, companion book, *52 Sundays of Soulful Celebration*, will provide worship leaders with historical vignettes from Black history that are easily accessible and written in a format that is readily compatible with current worship practices. It is hoped that this book will be used throughout the year along with the litanies that can be modified and excerpted to suit every occasion. In this way, it is hoped that the theological and liturgical practices of the Black church will remain connected to their historical origins.

Another need within this dimension is that of amplifying the voices of the social activists, turning the spotlight upon social justice themes. To this end, the author has created an educational mechanism called the “sermon song”. It allows highlights from prominent sermons and speeches to be spoken in the prophets’ own voices from the African American past. These 2 to 4 minute passages are interspersed with appropriate music from several genres of spirituals, hymns,

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

gospel songs, and contemporary renditions that reinforce the message. The combination of the spoken word and collective song, using uplifting orators and song leaders will help to inspire dignity, courage, and power within the congregants. Combining the word and the music lends a motivational thrust to the anti-racism, pro-reconciliation, social movements of today. Thus it will strengthen an area of Black church life that is often weak. While African Americans churches sustain social service ministries rather well, they do not always incorporate social analysis and social justice throughout the year, from Sunday to Sunday. The sermon-song is just one example of the creative ways that religious education departments can foster the prophetic role of the Black church, which is a unique and important part of the history of African American churches.

Finally, Black Christian education must ever keep its thumb upon the pulse of popular culture in the Black community, and especially that of Black youth. If heritage represents the past, culture expresses the dynamic present. One example of a modern Black youth movement is the Hip Hop culture that is now over 40 years old and has become part of the globally mainstream music, media, and artistic, entrepreneurial, and philanthropic culture. Many African Americans love Jesus and love Hip Hop. Many books and academic dissertations are now focusing upon the relationship between religion and hip hop. Christian hip hop, which attempts to fuse two seemingly dichotomous streams, has a huge following. The Black church cannot demonize “secular” behavior without a serious dialog with the African American artists who are the cultural trend-setters. The Black church has a history of severely criticizing certain elements of the culture without becoming better informed about the complexities and spirituality of its creators. Elements of Hip Hop culture are now being incorporated into worship and youth ministry. What shape it will take in the future is to be seen, but might have influence and undeniable. There needs

DELORES CARPENTER

to be more dialog about what is good, as well as what is unacceptable in the hip hop culture. The cultural/heritage dimension gives rise to the following goals:

Goals 1, 2, and 3

- 1) Every adult is motivated to participate in social justice movements that expand racial uplift and pride, while emphasizing the cultural strengths of African Americans.
- 2) Every adolescent is offered an identity and purpose connected to African American heroes and heroines from Black history, motivating them to strive for excellence, building upon the foundations of past generations.
- 3) Every child is exposed to instruction that corrects the negative stereotypes of Black people and affirms their blackness in a way that inspires dignity, hope and courage.

The Climate/Relational Dimension

The climate/relational dimension can be called the nurture dimension. Since Horace Bushnell's (1979) *Christian Nurture* first appeared in 1847, the word, "nurture" has remained a captivating concept. One of the most powerful demonstrations of its original use is given by Ella Mitchell's (1986) in *Black Nurture*. Metaphors for this dimension include the "beloved community" and identity within the "Body of Christ". The former was made popular in recent history through the writings of the twentieth century prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963), 'Strength to Love.' He defined the beloved community as a voluntary, cooperative covenant to take responsibility for one another. The second metaphor, The Body of Christ comes from the Apostle Paul's writings in the New Testament Bible. Paul discarded the image of the

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

family as inadequate for the Christian community and instead used the image of the body working together and valuing for each part as an ideal for Christian community. Together these two metaphors express the ideal of unity while at the same time allowing for particularity (1 Corinthians 12:12-26).

Concepts such as these call forth the context in which persons of faith are born, nurture, and mature. They affirm what James Fowler (1981) calls the “triadic nature of faith,” in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. Faith is relational. It assumes a universal a priori relationship between God, the Creator, and humanity. It also assumes that there is relationship among the different individuals and groups that inhabit the faith. In October 1989, James Forbes delivered a sermon entitled “*Whatever Happened to the Golden Rule?*” He stressed the fact that the ability to live by the golden rule assumes that persons are living in a community where, when they ask, it is given; when they seek, it is found; and when they knock, the door is opened (Paraphrase of Luke 11:9). James Forbes (1989) stated in an unpublished sermon that only from this kind of experience can one apply the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, as a realistic standard for Christian living. This eloquently defines the parameters of the climate/relational dimension. Learning occurs most readily in a loving, nurturing place. Time is required to establish this gathering where people come to know and trust one another. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1972) passionately writes of this contextual foundation as ontological empowerment and mutual, radical love that must be present between the teacher and the learner.

Some congregations are conglomerates of secondary associations. These are places where no one reveals self except at critical moments of birth, marriage, illness, and death. Other in-between times are dead zones in terms of the learning enterprise. This is not to minimize pivotal crisis

DELORES CARPENTER

points, but to caution that if that is the only engagement that individuals and families have with the faith, the faith community can become primarily a therapeutic center. If this occurs, the prophetic call to equip the saints to make a difference in the world can be lost to the congregation.

A climate that is inclusive to the learning enterprise always affirms the unique gifts given each member. When properly attended, this dimension leads to a warm, loving community where all persons realize that they are valued and interdependent. Goals 4, 5, and 6 emerge within this dimension.

Goals 4, 5, and 6

- 4) Every adult is valued as a recognizably gifted and graced participant.
- 5) Every adolescent has a place of belonging and acceptance and counts as friends those who share in the faith.
- 6) Every child is loved and joyously claimed as belonging to the whole community.

The Biblical/Theological Dimension

The enterprise of religious education begins with a purpose for life that is defined by God. To assert, as does the Westminster Catechism, that the purpose of human beings is to glorify God, then the starting point of all knowledge and wisdom is focus upon God. To search for what God requires is to search to understand God's ways. The greatest aid in this search is the holy scriptures of the faith. Much of the Judeo-Christian mandate for religious education comes from the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4-7:

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Christianity's Great Commission in Matthew 28 adds to the above. Disciples (students are to go into all the world, teaching men and women to observe what Jesus commanded): ¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. The language, concepts and topics important to the faith begin with the study of the bible.

Most bible studies incorporate a discussion of the theological truths in the passage. Robin Maas' (1982) *Church Bible Study Handbook* outlines a workable approach for congregations which incorporate the most recent biblical scholarship. According to Walter Wink's (1980) *Transforming Bible Study*, every congregation can be renewed through the excitement engendered in the congregation when the leaders of the congregation commit themselves to at least two hours of weekly Bible study plus preparation time. Although only a limited number of books can be covered in a given year, and sometimes only one, a great deal of cross references and other books of the Bible are covered in the process and it can be very rewarding. For example, when studying 1 Kings, one discovers that Paul devotes the entire twelfth chapter of Romans to a Christian perspective of the 19th chapter of 1

DELORES CARPENTER

Kings. The strength of the book by book approach is that each book is studied in its own context.

Life applications and theological reflection of the biblical text is greatly encouraged. And as groups become more sophisticated and skilled in this regard, they can teach others how to do it. Biblically prepared persons can help instructional material and teach other Bible classes. They can infuse the curriculum and teaching methods with informed biblical and theological insight. They can raise the level of discussion in such a way that everyone matures in faith. As technology makes libraries increasingly obsolete, carefully selected websites can be recommended that make biblical reference books, as well as theological books accessible to all. For the youngest and oldest students, there is still a need for copying appropriate handouts that amplify the study.

The historical Jesus and Jesus of today are fundamental to Christian teaching. What Jesus accomplished on Calvary and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, who became the early Apostles, is essential to the victory and empowerment of students. Every effort should be made to explore what was revealed about God through Jesus Christ, what God accomplished through Christ and what effect this may have on how life is lived and daily decisions are made.

To come to the conclusion that salvation is of God does not diminish the importance or praise worthiness of Jesus Christ. Appropriate Theo-centrism does not negate an informed Christology. The name Jesus should be used with great intentionality, giving Christians a clear access to Christ's life-affirming teaching and to the Holy Spirit as Christ's living presence that can guide and direct every thought and action. Adding to the three goals already cited above, three more goal statements emerge from the Biblical/theological dimension.

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

Goals 7, 8, and 9

- 7) Every adult should be a teachable Bible student, who practices various disciplines of the spiritual life, and can articulate who Jesus was and is.
- 8) Every adolescent should be teachable Bible student who practices various disciplines of the spiritual life, and can articulate who Jesus Christ was and is.
- 9) Every child should be a Bible student who is learning the Bible stories, how to pray comfortably and how Jesus was and is.

The Cognitive/Thinking Dimension

The cognitive/thinking dimension refers to the life-long process by which people appropriate knowledge through thinking, discussing, and expressing ideas. In *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Jean Piaget (1985) did the pioneering work in this area addressing among other things the moral development of the child. James Fowler (1981) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1978), *The Cognitive Developmental Approach to Moral Education*, have built upon their work to continue a much needed emphasis upon the important role that cognitive assimilation, accommodation, and adaptation play in learning and teaching. The cognitive/thinking dimension is especially important as religious educators try to design and teach what people need to “know” so that their lives can be informed by their faith. This relates to an adequate understanding of belief, theology, and ethics. Certain intellectual foundations are prerequisite. In this way, all education is religious in that it imparts language, concepts and processes of thought which can structure one’s faith.

Much of the discussion regarding moral and ethical decision making has examined the critical role that the cognitive element plays in individuals’ abilities to conceptualize alternatives. Kohlberg’s (1978) work on moral

DELORES CARPENTER

reasoning is informative in this regard. Kohlberg instructs the religious educator to seek to understand why persons make the decisions they do. What value indices do they use? The Stage Theory as recommended by Kohlberg undergirds the pedagogical approaches that point to a very important thinking factor. This factor is cognitive ability. Not all persons react to situations and dilemmas in the same way. Part of the explanation for this is the development of differences that shape constructs of thought. Although Kohlberg has been criticized for ignoring such elements as the will, emotions, experience, and relationships, such critiques do not distract from the importance of critical thinking and cognitive development. Kohlberg hypothesizes that moral reasoning, to some extent, rests upon cognitive ability. While many may attack the fact that Kohlberg selected justice as the highest value orientation of moral reasoning, he demonstrates that a cognitive/developmental approach to religious education is an important one.

Miscommunication in congregations over matters of faith, life and order may stem from differences which church members exemplify regarding their ability to think critically, to focus upon key concepts or principles, and to sort out what actions need to be taken. Kohlberg's (1978) theory has been used by Fowler (1981) to apply a cognitive, developmental approach to an understanding of how a person's faith changes throughout the life cycle. This is not a recommendation for exclusive use of Kohlberg's methodology. Rather it calls attention to thinking as an important ingredient in religious education.

In addition to a warm climate, congregations which have effective Christian education programs demonstrate an appreciation for a thinking climate. At a dissemination conference for "Effective Christian Education Study," this was the only finding which six denominations listed as one of the greatest strengths in Search Institute's (1990) national study. Within this same study, depending upon age, Peter Benson

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

and Carolyn Ekin (1990), in *Effective Christian Education*, researched that only 43-59% of adults and youth indicated that the church challenges their thinking. These data indicate that greater attention should be given to the thinking dimension. Members need to know that as life of faith challenges one's thinking.

Another way of approaching the cognitive/thinking dimension is to examine the teaching of belief in the church. Sara Little's (1983) *To Set One's Heart* does an excellent job of exploring how belief formation can be an organizing center for the church's teaching ministry. Little used avid Tracey's definition of belief as "a thematic explication of a particular historical, moral, or cognitive claim involved in a particular faith stance" (p.16). In *To Set One's Heart* Little also wrote, belief is "an idea held (thought and experienced) to be true" (p.16). Little's constitutive believing rests, as stated by Herbert Farmer, "As full an assurance of truth as it is possible for a human mind to have" (pp.40-41). Such approximation or full assurance of truth is measured by the extent to which a belief is inherently compelling; satisfies one's nature and helps manage one's world; and reveals internal consistent themes and external harmonies with other experience and knowledge.

Little's (1983) five models of information processing, group interaction, indirect communication, personal development, and action/reflection include a concern for the cognitive dimension. In her analysis, the search for truth is most important. Therefore, every Christian education program needs to assess the extent to which it is education human beings to be rational, thinking persons. The cognitive ability which helps a person to hypothesize and synthesize is essential. A Christian interpretation of the complicated, multi-faceted situation which the world presents depends upon these skills. Understanding the social and ethical meanings of substance abuse, AIDS, abortion, poverty, euthanasia, war, and homosexuality are complex; yet, these are the very topics

DELORES CARPENTER

that church leaders must interpret. Such issues require clear cognitive skills alongside spiritual, humanitarian, and inter-group skills. In a mission oriented framework, such as the one proposed here, cognitive skills are necessary to engage social analysis and to structure. Mission cannot be beneficial and fruitful unless it rests upon leadership development in these areas.

Of course, cognitive ability and development alone cannot define the task of congregational education. This dimension must be combined with the other facts outlined in this essay. But, the mystery of faith never minimizes the significance of cognition. In *The Faith We Affirm: Basic Beliefs of the Disciples of Christ*, Ronald E. Osborn (1979) comments:

This commitment to reason does not eliminate all mystery from life...faith bows in reverence and humility before wonders too deep to fathom. Yet...do not make a virtue of not understanding. (p.16)

Goals 10, 11, and 12

Goals ten, eleven, and twelve arise from the cognitive/thinking dimension.

- 10) Every adult is a practical theologian, who is able to interpret life situations in light of the gospel.
- 11) Every adolescent is developing in the areas of moral reasoning and ethical thinking.
- 12) Every child is given an understandable religious vocabulary, and encouraged to learn more about the faith.

The Interpersonal/Group Process Dimension

Integral to achieving any mission, goal, objective or action plan is a network of people who work well together,

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

both interpersonally and in groups. Since the church is a voluntary organization that depends upon good will and voluntary commitment, the maintenance of relationships is one of the key considerations within the educational enterprise. One of the greatest impediments to achieving the worthy goals that congregates establish is the breakdown in personalities and inter-group dynamics. Such breakdown is often manifested as conflict. Loren Broadus (n.d.) defines conflict as “energy and interest searching for a solution”. Conflict can be constructive or destructive. To be sensitive to this dimension is to be aware of both individual and inter-group development.

According to ego psychology, the ego acts as mediator between the development of the self and the self's relationship with the environment. The ego psychologist who has greatly influenced church education has been Erik Erikson. In *Childhood and Society*, Erikson (1963) identifies eight epigenetic stages. At each stage of the ego's development, the ego must find a successful resolution to the conflict that arises and provide a synthesis of the positive and negative aspects. Without a resolution of the inner ambiguity, individuals project this ambiguity onto others in the form of interpersonal conflict. Persons must be taught to deal with ego while achieving mutual goals. Many church people fear being criticized, confronted, or rejected; they need acceptance, nurture, and support. If a congregation does not have a system for reinforcing the latter while allowing the former, it can immobilize the ministry of the church, thus preventing effective ministries. The challenge for the religious educator is to present methods which insure that people can hear and understand others' opinions and positions. All persons need to be able to tell their sides of the story, be listened to, believe that their ideas are taken seriously, receive attention, feel appreciated, and be part of the structures that they can influence. People also need to be taught that

DELORES CARPENTER

acceptance does not imply agreement, but rather, acceptance safeguards fact, truth, forgiveness, respect and integrity.

To acknowledge these needs and tensions is to encourage constructive conflict resolution, with the goal of reaching a consensus necessary for group activity. A clearly spelled out process should be discussed and referenced occasionally, which helps congregations manage the conflict that unavoidably occurs. Donald Bossart (1980), in *Creative Conflict in Religious Education and Church Administration*, points out that, in order to resolve conflicts, the church needs "...a system which is both growth oriented and effective in past performance as well as group maintenance" (p.202). The effective use of God-given differences, which is a part of individuals, is important. When differences are not effectively utilized, they create a breakdown which inhibits the achievement of the mission.

The struggle for power and the need for status in the congregation increase whenever change is proposed. In spite of the comfort which comes from a sense of security, it is unhealthy for the church to sacrifice change at the altar of security. Change is a constant. In *New Ways of Managing Conflict*, Rensis and Jane Likert (1976) discovered that innovative thinking environments can be managed only when there is supportive leadership, integrative goals and supportive behavior, de-emphasis upon status and depersonalization of problem solving, consensus building, "win/win problem solving, and an interacting network of persons who are "linked pins." Linked multiple overlapping groups place individuals in relationships in subgroups within the larger organization. These "linked pins" provide a communication flow and influence throughout the whole that enables reciprocal influence between groups and the larger organization. All leaders should seek out feedback from this network on a regular basis.

The faith community needs to understand that the relationships which it provides are the media through which

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

persons find self-worth and self-acceptance, receive the necessary feedback for growth, experience the trust to take risks, and experience the working of the Holy Spirit through themselves and others. Group maintenance is as important as group tasks. This is often difficult to learn, especially for task-oriented persons. When disregarded, ideas and programs are pushed faster than individuals and groups are ready to go. To achieve the mission of the church, goals thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen are added.

Goals Thirteen, Fourteen, and Fifteen

- 13) Every adult works cheerfully with all groups and individuals within the congregation and broader faith community to advocate and actively work on behalf of others.
- 14) Every adolescent is a self-assured individual who relates well to others and works along with others in service projects.
- 15) Every child is a trusting, self-expressive person who cares about and shares with others.

Conclusion

As churches become more and more like “full-service” institutions, they must attend to an array of concerns which at one time the family and community could be counted upon to perform. Many of today’s families and communities do not provide the stability required to impart values and traditions which are essential to the educational task. This is a great challenge to the church, and one that should not go unnoticed. If the Black church is not equipped to be a responsive participant in the partnership with families, schools and neighborhoods, she will continue to lose the influence that she once held as a central influence in the black community. If an adequate mission oriented framework is not established, many more persons will turn away from the church,

DELORES CARPENTER

disappointed that her networks of care and concern are inadequate. This calls for an increase in the number of different ways that congregations equip their members to witness to their faith. This means more diversified programming directed both within the congregation and outward toward the wider community and world. Congregational education can be the circuit through which all facets of congregational life are informed, transformed and energized. Then and only then can the mission of Jesus Christ be properly empowered, understood, interpreted and achieved.

These fifteen goal statements invite every member of the congregation to participate in the Christian education program of the church and to remain a learner-teacher with a life-long commitment to the teaching-learning process. The oversight of this most important ministry is best vested with persons who dedicate themselves to the discovery of the most effective way to institutionalize and humanize such an endeavor within the congregation.

Bibliography

- Benson, P. & Eklin, C. *Effective Christian education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations: A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life*. Minneapolis, MN: The Search Institute, 1990.
- Bossart, D. *Creative Conflict in Religious Education and Church Administration*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1980.
- Bushnell, H. *Christian Nurture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979.
- Carpenter, D.(1996). "Religious Education" in Jack Salzman, David Smith, and Cornel West, eds., *Encyclopedia of African American History and Culture*, (pp.2310-2313). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

GOALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

- Carpenter, D. (General Editor). *African American Heritage Hymnal*. Chicago: GIA Publications Inc., 2001.
- Crockett, J. *Teaching Scripture from an African American Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1990.
- Erickson, E. *Identity, Youth and Crisis: Insight and Responsibility*. New York: Norton, 1964.
- Erikson, E. *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1963.
- Foster, C. & Smith, F. *Black Religious Education: Conversations on Double Consciousness and the Work of Grant Shockley*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- Fowler, J. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981.
- Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Trans. Myna Bergman Ramos). New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 1972.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Strength to Love*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Lawrence, K. "The Cognitive Developmental Approach to Moral Education." In Peter Scharf *Readings in Moral Education* (pp.36-51) .Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1978.
- Little, S. *To Set One's Heart: Belief and Teaching in the Church*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1983.
- Maas, R. *Church Bible Study Handbook*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982.
- Mitchell, E. "Oral tradition: Legacy of Faith for the Black Church", In *Religious Education* 8 (1). Evanston, IL: The Religious Education Association, Winter 1986.
- Mitchell, E. "Black Nurture," in Emmanuel McCall's *Black Church Lifestyles: Rediscovering the Black Christian Experience*. (pp.45-68). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

DELORES CARPENTER

- Osborne, R. *The Faith We Affirm: Basic Beliefs of the Disciples of Christ*. St. Louisville, KY: Christian Board of Publication, 1979.
- Peter L. Benson. *Promoting Faith Maturity: What Congregations Can Do, Part 4, Points of View* (videotape). Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 1990.
- Piaget, J. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. Riverside, NJ: Free Press Div. of Macmillan Publishing Co., 1985.
- Wimberly, A. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, revised edition. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- Wink, W. *Transforming Bible Study: A Teacher's Guide*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980.