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THE LOCAL CHURCH AS AN ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT[1]

Kieran Scott

St. Bonaventure University
St. Bonaventure, NY 14778

There is a bewildering confusion in the church today with regard to the term religious education. Professionals and practitioners are perplexed as to its purpose, scope and identity. In our community of discourse, people are using the same words but in different semantic universes.[2] This has given rise to a lack of conceptual and curriculum cohesion, and contradictions as to the nature of the enterprise. In effect, different people have very different purposes and agendas as they go about their work.

Traditionally, religious education has been neatly assigned to a corner of the church for children. In recent years, efforts have been made to draw in more adults and to employ "adult" educational methods to get better results. However, the rationale, for the most part, has remained unquestioned. Church religious education arose out of concern for orthodoxy and a desire to transmit one's religious tradition intact. Essentially, those goals and purposes have not changed, as official documents testify.[3]

We have reached, however, an historical turning point and a

[1] This essay attempts to stimulate a conversation across denominational lines. Some of the issues have been in the forefront of discussion in some Protestant denominations for a long time. Generally, in theory and practice, questions of polity and critical principle have had major implications for Protestants in this country and across the world. The issues, I believe, are not fully resolved. On the Catholic side, they are only now becoming acute and central. [See Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confront Modernity: A Protestant View* (New York: Seabury 1975). For a conservative reaction see James Hitchcock, *Catholicism and Modernity* (New York: Seabury, 1979)].

[2] See my critical analysis of key terms in "Communicative Competence and Religious Education", *Lumen Vitae*, 35, 1 (1980): 75-96.

[3] For the current Roman Catholic position, see *To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Education* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1973); *General Catechetical Directory* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C., 1970); *Sharing the Light of Faith* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C., 1979); Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter, *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979), *The Living Light* 17, 1 (Spring 1980): 44-89.

painful period of transition. Beneath the surface is the growing conviction that the church cannot survive the ordeal of religious education-as-usual. We are living in a period "between past and future,"[4] where the old model has broken down and a re-envisioning of our task is emerging as we move into a new paradigm. What is at stake here is a reconceptualization of the term and a near reversal of its meaning. The contrast can be stated succinctly: (1) Traditional model: religious education is directed toward church initiation, deeper affiliation and conformity to a set of dogmatic beliefs; (2) New stipulative meaning: religious education is a concern for life-long development in all its depth and breadth.

These remarks set a context and enable us to raise the central concerns and questions of this paper: What educational contribution can the Christian church make to religious education for life-span development? What wisdom(s) does it embody and offer in its lived-life? Does its social/institutional form help or hinder the developmental journey of its members? Does the church really want religious education?[5]

The following six preliminary statements lay out the operational premises of this essay and act as a springboard of response to the above questions.

1. Theories of human development have been excessively psychological. Many lack an adequate social sensitivity and most do not refer to religion — except as an obstacle to be outgrown.
2. Environmental factors play a decisive role in psychological, social and religious growth.[6] Consequently, if we are to support human development, we need to *modify* the social institutions that shape our lives.
3. If the church is seriously concerned about human development, it needs to provide an appropriate model and a forum for working through life's tasks and arriving at new religious understandings.[7]

[4] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961).

[5] See Charles Melchert, "Does the Church Really Want Religious Education", *Religious Education*, 69, 1 (1974): 12-22. Melchert claims the church has "substituted various forms of indoctrination for education", p. 19. The question is posed from the reverse direction but with the same underlying concerns by Harrison S. Elliott in *Can Religious Education Be Christian?* (New York: Macmillan, 1940).

[6] See Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Reality and Research in the Ecology of Human Development", in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 119, 6 (1975): 439-469, and *The Ecology of Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Gabriel Moran, *Education Toward Adulthood: Religion and Life-Long Learning* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979): 82-129.

[7] See Henry Simmons, "Human Development: Some Conditions for Adult Faith at Age Thirty", *Religious Education*, 71, 6 (November-December 1976): 563-572, and Antoine Vergote, "Psychological Conditions of Adult Faith, *Lumen Vitae*, 15, 4 (October-December 1960): 623-634.

4. Religious education is not simply a church program, but a paradigm for the church as an environment of human maturity.
5. Religious education toward human development allows the church to reclaim its root religious humanism, to embody the incarnational principle and to maintain itself in truth in practice.[8]
6. Human maturity is marked by personal wholeness, caring social interrelatedness and the integration of opposites. This process and ideal is compatable with the vision and telos of the Christian religion.[9]

In this essay, "ecology of human development" is our guide and central metaphor in examining the church's lived-life. However, looking through this central metaphor reveals the fact that this form of religious education poses a problem for the church. Is there not a clash between the current pattern of church organization and the process of human development? This paper seeks to uncover and unblock some of the barriers, and proposes an alternative organizational pattern conducive to human development.

A critical point of methodology needs stating here. This study is not an exercise in "critical" ecclesiology. Ecclesiology, as a branch of theology, offers specifically a *theological* approach to the life of the church. This perspective brings the church's own concepts, language and criteria to bear on its own life. The method and criteria tend to be self-justifying and self-legitimating. In his fine book on the church, written some twenty years ago, James Gustafson[10] speaks directly to this intramural problem. If we think exclusively, he writes, in the church's own language we will not see many phases of our own existence. Likewise, he notes: "If one answers only in terms meaningful to the properly initiated theologian, not much has been explained, and not much understood".[11]

The church, however, is earthen — the stuff of natural and historical life. Consequently, contemporary social disciplines and perspectives will be utilized to enable us to see the many phases of

[8] See Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976): 530-602 and *The Church — Maintained in Truth* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

[9] See William Bouwsma, "Christian Adulthood" in *Daedalus* 105, Spring 1976: 77-92 and "Catechesis and Human Development", in *Sharing the Light of Faith*, pp. 102-113. Bouwsma writes, "the Christian life is like adolescence, that stage in which the adult seems, however ambiguously, trembling to be born." p. 81.

[10] *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976). First published 1961. Gustafson interprets the church as a *human*, *natural* and *political* community, a community of *language*, *memory* and *understanding*, *belief* and *action*.

[11] Ibid, p. 7.

its existence. This will be particularly valuable in examining the process and pattern of the institution with reference to its social function. This social analysis does not displace theological investigation. It does, however, prevent theological reductionism i.e., the exclusive use of biblical and doctrinal language and criteria in the interpretation of the church. Christian traditions can and should bring their biblical/theological perspectives to bear on their lived-experience. Other social interpretations, however, are needed to uncover the central questions and concerns of this essay.

What we are concerned about here is *education* and the structural form of an institution that allows and facilitates people to grow up. The human and social sciences are employed as a mode of critique and a means for proposing the revitalization of church and the regeneration of its people. It is in this context that the following proposal is offered: The local church is an ecology of human development when it is patterned as a network of "*base communities*" and has *education* as a built-in process. The paradigm takes (base) *community* and *education* as its foundation.[12] The thesis propounds that when the church functions in a communal and educative manner, religion can play a potent and positive force in human development. The core of this essay is to fill out the details of this proposal and to substantiate these claims.

Specifically, I examine (a) the form and meaning of community, (b) community and human development, and (c) the church as "base community." From the side of education, the dialectic between church and education is explored. The local church is viewed through the educative forms of (1) communal *practice* and (2) the process of study. Within communal practice, I investigate (a) church community as educator, (b) authority and human maturity, and (c) democracy as an ecology of education. Finally, under the process of study, the role of the church as reflecting community is considered.

The Local Church as Community

The interest in the church as community is not new.[13] However,

[12] The categories I used here are parallel to the ones Gabriel Moran uses but from a different angle and with the added focus on "*base* community." See Moran, *Religious Body: Design for a New Reformation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

[13] For an excellent scriptural and patristic perspective on communal ecclesia see Bernard Prusak, "Hospitality Extended or Denied: Koinonia Incarnate From Jesus to Augustine", *The Jurist* 36, 1976: 89-126. Prusak notes that the communal model of church has been theologically and theoretically acknowledged but not yet officially worked out canonically or practically.

there are new perspectives and expressions that need attending. Ecclesiastical rhetoric sets the word afloat so that its concrete practical significance tends to evaporate. The power of the word gets defused when there is no consistency in its use, no comprehension of its form or nature, and no delimitation of its characteristics. On the other hand, the word community has a rich ambiguity built into it that allows it to embrace the complexity and profundity of human life. We can now use the word with some degree of sociological precision, but there are also psychological, philosophical and religious questions inherent to this comm-union of humans.

The contemporary quest for community springs from some deep human needs for bonding, continuity and purpose.[14] The restoration of the personal/communal dimensions of life are the critical needs of the day.[15] The church could make an invaluable contribution to these genuine human aspirations by offering and demonstrating a variety of kinds of community expression. But, before the church can offer itself as part of a solution, it needs to explore how deeply it is part of the contemporary problem. Only a radically different form of (church) institution than what now exists could credibly pose as a sign of freedom and a symbol of communal life. To place the issue in perspective, we turn to an analysis of social reality.

Modernity has been noted for the progressive separation of the individual from our collective public world.[16] This has brought about an unprecedented counterposition of individual and society — with the individual relegated to the private sphere and the society transformed into an abstraction. The basic dichotomy is between the huge and immensely powerful institutions of the public sphere and the comparative powerlessness of our private lives. On one side of the continuum, there are the economic, political, educational bureaucracies and health and human service agencies. At the other pole, primary groups predominate and play a central role in the acquisition of personal meaning and identity. Modern megastructures overwhelm us in terms of their sheer size, power and complexity. They are often remote, impersonal and utilitarian. They may be efficient and effective but, generally, are not very healthy arrangements for humans and other creatures.[17] Consequently, refuge is sought in the primary group (e.g., the family) where there are high expectations for intimacy and mutual support. This public/private split breeds anomie, and it has the effect of weakening and undercutting the tribal, collective or communal character of the human race. This, Berger writes, is the built-in crisis of modernity.[18]

The picture drawn here may be too stark in its contrasts. Modifying this interpretation is the recent recognition and naming of mediating structures that stand between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of the public sphere.[19] Notable among them are neighborhoods, ethnic groups, churches, voluntary associations, and subcultures. These mediating structures establish links between people who share a sense of belonging and personal values and, at the same time, provide a social moral foundation by generating and sustaining values in the public arena. They can act as a buffer for people over-against public agencies. However, their role should not be overestimated. They are sometimes too large and too similar in organizational patterns to contemporary bureaucracy.

The average local church, as an intermediary organization, cannot adequately supply, *in its present form*, the caring context of a communal life today. Its aspirations should be more modest. Its appropriate role, as an intermediate association, is to *facilitate* and *support* the functioning of communities linked in a pattern of federation.[20] If the local parish imaged and internalized its role in

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[14] Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962; rpt, 1973), Andrew Greeley, "The Persistence of Community", in *The Persistence of Religion* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973): 23-35, and Digby E. Baltzell, *The Search for Community in Modern America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

[15] See Theodore Roszak, *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1978). Roszak advocates networks of small supportive communities whose life style is marked by simplicity, justice, solitude and economic independence (pp. 288-303).

[16] See Peter Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), especially Chapters 6 and 11. This private-public split is only *one* aspect of modernity. On other aspects (relativity, complexity, pluralism and choice imperative) see Berger's "Modernity as the Universalizing of Heresy", in *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979): 1-31.

[17] See Philip Zimbardo, "The Age of Indifference", *Psychology Today*, (August 1980): 71-76. Zimbardo claims the quality of our social life is being diluted, distorted and demeaned by these structural arrangements.

[18] Berger, p. 134.

[19] Peter Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1977), and Theodore Kerrine and Richard J. Neuhaus, "Mediating Structures: A Paradigm for Democratic Pluralism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 446 (November 1979): 10-18.

[20] See Martin Buber, *Paths to Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958): 129-138. Buber indicates the need for a federation of small communities as the foundation for social life.

this manner, some fundamental shifts in attitudes and organization could emerge.

As a backdrop to our discussion, it is important to make a distinction between the ideal of community and the lived-expression in reality.[21] The ideal refers to a vision of human unity not-yet-realized. The lived embodiment denotes actual small group demonstrations. Both are of fundamental significance to life and need each other in tension. Our discussion here, however, will focus on the latter.

There are two current uses of the term community that describe the historical reality, namely: a *social form* of organization and a *quality of human experience*.[22] Both are integrated in practice but clarifying the distinction can increase our understanding of the phenomenon.

As a social form, community indicates any small group whose pattern of behavior falls between the more intense, emotional cohesion of primary groups and the more formal regulated behavior of associations. It is a social setting in which members can move beyond the limits of their private lives to involvement in the wider public sector of human experience. Some communities incorporate several elements of the primary group and integrate them with some characteristics of the association. The wide diversity of communal groups, however, function with a minimum of formality and there is little feeling of being within a structure at all. The form calls for a quite small group of people, in which members can exercise flexible roles, and experience and express themselves more completely and authentically.

As a quality of human experience, community is a genuine human context of interdependence, mutual support and sense of belonging. It is marked by concern and openness, shared values and visions, common meanings, and commitments. Essentially, it designates the particularly human way of being human vis-a-vis other people. Humans meet each other on human terms and share and risk on a level of meaningful exchange. "The word," Nisbet writes, "Encompasses all forms of relationship which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion and continuity in time."[23] In that sense, community is the single most important life-death issue in contemporary society.

[21] Gabriel Moran, *The New Community* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970): 35-74, and *Religious Body: Design for a New Reformation.*

[22] Evelyn E. Whitehead, "Clarifying the Meaning of Community", *The Living Light*, 15, 3 (Fall 1978): 376-391, and "The Structure of Community: Toward Forming the Parish as a Community of Faith", in *The Parish in Community and Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979): 35-51. On the classic distinction between community (gemeinschaft) and society (gesellschaft), see Ferdinand Toennies, *Community and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

Etymologically, the word refers to a human unity in which the human is affirmed in comm-union and common responsibility. It is a setting where the distinction of the individual person is respected and maximized; and where, at the same time, a bond of unity is established and deepened. Human life unites without destroying. Bonds are forged out of dissimilar stands.[24] The movement is always toward oneness (unity) and, at the same time, toward manyness (diversity). This does not mean that the group has solved all the problems of life, but it indicates a genuine human context in which to tend them.

But, in the final analysis, community is not an end in itself — even though it is a value in itself. Having a task beyond the group is essential for its own health and nourishment. It needs that built-in protection against isolationism and narcissism. When life is lived in this creative tension, the quality of experience conveys a human way of living, dying and going beyond death in the company of other humans. It seems quite obvious, then, that psychological, philosophical and religious questions are connected to communal living. Indeed, they seem unavoidable and are indigenous to its nature.

In terms of our central metaphor, community can appropriately be described as an ecology of human development. The form and quality of interpersonal engagement is a source of identity and integration.[25] Its social context is a social ethic that fosters freedom, justice and responsibility. The process aims to keep human life truly human. People meet at a level of common humanity, share intimacy and affection, truth and love, continuity and care in a way that enables them to become more wholly themselves.

Some novel attempts have been made in recent years to embody communal expressions in local church settings. The

[23] Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966): 47.

[24] Joanmarie Smith, "An American Theory of Community", *The Living Light*, 9 (Winter 1972): 46-57, and with Gloria Durka, "Community: An Aesthetic Perspective", in *Aesthetic Dimensions of Religious Education* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979): 99-106. Durka and Smith relate the characteristics of a work of art to the conditions for actualizing an aesthetic community.

[25] Zimbardo, "Social-support networks provide emotional sustenance, informative feedback, and validation of self-worth", p. 76.

emergence of "Basic Christian Communities"[26] in various parts of the world are significant examples of grass-roots sharing and solidarity. The process and principles could be applied worldwide in high-density urban settings as well as small rural parishes. These natural groupings have sprung up among people who live in close geographic and/or social proximity so that they can meet easily at regular intervals and share prayer, problems and projects together.[27]

Conceptually and concretely, the group's life is organized around three major categories and concerns: *kerygma* (gospel), *koinonia* (fellowship), and *diaconia* (service). *Kerygma* suggests prayer, study and worship. *Koinonia* includes a concerted effort to share talents, concerns and possessions in an open atmosphere of acceptance. While *diaconia* involves exploration of the community's needs, strategizing to solve the problems and responding with the necessary action programs. Not all groups are equally involved in *each* area of concern. Local problems give rise to a different focus. Each attempt, however, to work out of and hold themselves accountable to the three major religious areas of concern.

"Basic Christian Communities" are much more than a new pastoral strategy; they are efforts to forge out new church structures.[28] There is the conscious awareness that the old parish patterns are not responding to current circumstances, and there is a felt need for a deeper experience of church community than the present structure offers. "Basic Communities" present the modern local church with a positive creative alternative to its traditional form. They function as centers of church renewal and cultural critique. They are cells where Christians encounter each other to express their faith, deepen their ties and organize their lives more effectively against oppression, poverty, meaninglessness and death. The process has a built-in spirit of care, critical analysis and social responsibility. It is driven by the motive force of liberation and human development.[29]

[26] "Base communities" (communidades eclesiales de base) have flourished in the past few decades, particularly in Latin America, East Africa and parts of the United States. Of the material available in English, the following are some descriptive and representative examples: James Bolger, "Communidades Christianas De Base in Theory and Praxis: A Realistic Option", *The Dunwoodie Review*, 14, 1 (Spring 1974): 22-42; Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, "Building Christian Communities", *Lumen Vitae*, 32, 2 (1977): 143-196; Joseph Komonchak, "Christ's Church in Today's World: Medillin, Puebla and the United States", *The Living Light* 17, 2 (Summer 1980): 108-120; Patrick Leonard, "Communidades de Base", *Review for Religious*, 31, 5 (1971): 785-795; Archbishop Elias Mutale, "Small Christian Communities: A Look Inside an African Church", *Origins* 10, 11 (August 28, 1980): 162-166; Maurice Monette, "Basic Christian Communities: Parish with a Difference", PACE 10 (1980); Jacques Van Nieuwenhove, "Puebla and the Grass-Roots Communities", *Lumen Vitae*, 34, 4 (1979): 310-330; Peader Kirby, "Basic Christian Communities", *Catholic Mind* (June 1980): 23-33; Thomas Bissonnette, "Communidades Ecclesiales de Base: Some Contemporary Attempts to Build Ecclesia Koinonia", *The Jurist* 36 (1976): 24-58; and *Basic Christian Communities — Latin American Documentation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C., 1976).

[27] Kalilombe, p. 192.

[28] Van Nieuwenhove, pp. 310-330. Questions of authority and caste, I believe, have not yet adequately been worked out theoretically or theologically in these church models.

There is the critical need, then, for the local church to *facilitate* and *coordinate* the formation of networks of grass-roots communities.[30] A federated union of small groups provides a center to go out from to remake society and to return to in order to renew ourselves. Interaction within and between these groups is needed, however, to guard against parochialism and sectarianism, and to goad us toward the not-yet-realized ideal. These practical demonstrations of communal living provide a religious way of thinking, feeling and doing. They model patterns of Christian living[31] that become effective means of fostering religious development and a potent force of human advancement.

The Local Church as Ecology of Education

The second constitutive element of the church as an environment for life-long growth is the process of education. Education is a concern for the reorganization and reconstruction of human life. It is the effort of every generation to improve its lot, to make experience understandable, and our subsequent lives more intelligent. Dewey set the question of education in context of social life. He drew attention to the formative influences (conscious and unconscious) of our social environment. "Any social arrangement," he wrote, "that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it."[32] And, he notes, "This quality is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community."[33] Education and community, then, tend to become coextensive. Both pertain to the establishment of mutuality and maturity.

[29] The influence of liberation theology and the problem posing (educational) methodology of Paulo Freire empowers these groups with inner consciousness-raising and outer public praxis.

[30] For guidelines on this structural arrangement, see Mutale on the Arch-diocese of Kasama, Zambia.

[31] See Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979).

[32] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916): 6.

[33] Ibid, p. 58. See also Fred Newman and Donald Oliver, "Education and Community", *Harvard Educational Review*, 37, 1 (1967): 61-106.

The local church educates by being a community. The quality of its education will be as good as the quality of its communal life. The process of education is the total ecological life of the church — its language, pattern of authority, social/sexual arrangements, study programs, corporate works and liturgical expressions. We can say, then, that the whole church community educates the whole community through its total communal life.[34] Durka and Smith succinctly capture this central thesis. "The fostering of community," they write, "has been seen as a major task of religious education. The flowering of community has been viewed as a sign that religious education has occurred."[35]

Yet, reports from the mainline churches indicate that this picture is largely unfulfilled. Churches are quick to assert that they are communities. For the most part, however, they appear as unresponsive bureaucracies. The attraction of many contemporary religious cults is that they offer elements of spontaneity, celebration and bonding so often lacking in established religions. Cults have their own particular educational difficulties, but their presence bears witness to the glaring organizational problems in the Christian churches.

My interest is in a form of church life that educates. As illustrated above, there is more to education than textbooks, classrooms or a few adult education courses. These may be a help or hindrance to education. What is of deeper significance is the institutional form and context in which they are set. The institutional pattern does more to dictate the tone and tenor of the educational environment than anything else that we might want to call "content." The form *is* the pervasive content, educating or miseducating, by its pattern of human relations. In effect, then, the organizational structure has a major impact on what people are likely to learn.

What are the educational signals sent out by the current church structure? Does it foster community? What are its organizational principles? Its power relations? Does it nourish intelligence?

[34] See Thomas Downes, "Lifelong Learning in the Local Parish", *The Living Light*, 15, 2 (1978): 280-301, and *The Parish as Learning Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979); John Kater, "The Parish as Educational Community", in *Homegrown Christian Education* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979): 24-31; Moran, *Religious Body: Design for a New Reformation*, pp. 145-186, and David P. O'Neill, "The Community as Educator: A New Model for Catechetics", *The Living Light*, 8, 3 (Fall 1971): 6-22.

[35] Durka and Smith, "Community: An Aesthetic Perspective", p. 99. The affirmation of community as a *value in itself* here is not an introverted stance, but rather the acknowledgment of (religious) value of the inter-personal. On the revelational character of community and its context for conversion see Parker Palmer, "A Place Called Community", *The Promise of Paradox* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1980): 67-91.

Stimulate critical awareness of our personal and social predicaments? Does it support an educational process which emphasizes freedom and personal responsibility? In sum, does it lead people to think, interpret and decide for themselves? When measured against these (educational) questions, it seems that the very structure of the Christian church, the shape of the system, runs counter to the venture we name education.

Religious institutions have an organizational problem today. At its roots is the often *unacknowledged* fact that certain forms of education clash with certain forms of religion. This is particularly true when the current power patterns in the Christian church encounter the spirit of educational critique and its movement toward democratic forms. The result frequently is, on one side, institutional retrenchment and, on the other, anti-institutional rhetoric. Neither offers a way out of the dilemma.

The churches need an education that criticizes the current form of church. They require institutional forms which make available conditions for the releasing of new educational possibilities. Central to this issue are the principles on which it is organized and the pattern of authority that govern the institution's life. This is an extremely difficult question for the churches to face, but it is unavoidable where the question of human maturity is at stake.[36] If one wants to improve the educational process in the church, an obvious place to begin is to shift the authority pattern of the organization. It is not an exaggeration to say that the *structure* of the church's life today almost precludes education. The introduction of a new textbook, pastor/bishop/pope hardly makes a dent in the organizational form — and may, in fact, solidify it.[37] But, changing the authority pattern would itself be profoundly educational.

Authority is concerned with the elementary problem of humans living together. The last generation of our national experience has been an explosive and painful effort to work out its place in our lives and institutions. There are few issues as volatile, perplexing and confusing. The christian churches have been rent apart on the issue. Liberals and conservatives fight over the best way to run the system. Substantially, however, they share a common game plan which prevents reconceptualization of the

[36] Bernard Boelen, "The Maturity Concept as a Basic Factor in the Problem of Authority", *Humanitas*, 1 (Fall 1965): 123-133.

[37] See essay by Hans Kung, "Pope John Paul II: His First Year", *New York Times*, October 19, 1979, op. ed.

problem.[38] In the meantime, tension heightens between self-reflective Christians who critically appropriate their tradition, and church officials who limit open inquiry and appeal to obedience. In between, there are multitudes in local churches who show an immense capacity for passivity, conformity and fear of freedom.[39]

The ecclesiastical form of authority is still close to medieval and firmly entrenched in pyramidic fashion. This is easily recognizable in the Roman Catholic Church, but it prevails also in a more disguised manner in some Protestant groups. The main elements of the structure have endured due to the "sacralization" of the organization. "The church," writes Kelly, "has tended to take necessary, time-conditioned human structures out of their historical context and to impute to them an aura of divine causality, locating them within a 'sacred' frame of reference."[40] This ploy, he notes, places a protective shield around the institution and makes it resistant to change. It also makes any criticism seem disloyal, if not "heretical."

The principles governing the church institution have remained decisively undemocratic. Its pattern of power continues to produce class structure and authoritarian concepts of leadership. This has led to the current "crisis of authority," or, more accurately, to the *lack* of authority and crisis of legitimation in church institutions. For many, the traditional structures have lost their plausibility.

[38] The current debate between the Magisterium and theologians in the Catholic tradition is too narrow and inner ecclesiastical to adequately deal with the question. See Raymond Brown, "Debunking Some Fiction: The Dilemma of the Magisterium Vs. the Theologian", *Catholic Mind*, 76 (September 1978): 13-29; Richard McCormick, "The Magisterium and Theology", *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, 24 (1969): 239-254 and Avery Duller, "The Theologians and the Magisterium", *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, 31 (1976): 235-246. On the evaporation of authority and the present structural impotence in the Catholic church see E. Glenn Hinson, "The Crisis of Teaching Authority in Roman Catholicism", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 14 (1977): 66-88; John MacKensie, "Authority Crisis in Roman Catholicism", in *Erosion of Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971): 37-58, ed. Clyde L. Manschreck; Nathan Mitchell, "The Problem of Authority in Roman Catholicism", *Review and Expositor*, 75 (1978): 195-209; Matthias Neuman and Jesse Nash, "Authority, Obedience, and Personal Initiative in a Pluralistic Church" (Part 1), *Spirituality Today*, 32, 3, (1980): 218-236; Gorden Myers and Richard Schoenherr, "The Baptism of Power", *New Catholic World*, Sept./Oct. (1980): 217-221 and Andrew Greeley, "Church Authority: Beyond the Problem", *National Catholic Reporter*, Sept. 26, (1980): 7-9. These works accurately describe the problem but do not point beyond to a re-solution.

[39] Eric Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Avon Books, 1969; first published 1941). Peter Marin, "Spiritual Obedience", *Harpers* (February 1979): 43-58.

[40] Geffrey Kelly, "Futurists and Reformers: The Shape of Tomorrow's Church", in *Theology Confronts a Changing World* (West Mystic, Ct.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1977): 80.

However, freedom is not attained by casting aside institutions, attacking authority or officials in positions of authority. It is important to criticize *particular forms* of authority and *how some exercise the office*. But, institutions need authority. It is "the groundwork of the world."[41] Without authority, human life degenerates into chaos and violence. There is only one real alternative: to replace one form of authority with another, i.e., to plan and to build institutions that humanize rather than dehumanize. This is the challenge awaiting the Christian churches.

Recent efforts, in theory and practice, to work out alternative authority patterns have suffered from conceptual confusion. The word is clouded in controversy and evokes negative reactions. The positive meaning of the word can be restored when we distinguish between the *office or role* of authority and the *person* who exercises the office or role. A person is not authority. But, people are necessary to perform the role and assume the office. When we insist on this distinction, it allows us to affirm authority, see the folly of attacking it and, at the same time, criticize its inadequate forms.

Authority, writes Moran, is "the capacity of an organization to use power and to legitimate the use of that power."[42] This deliberate employment of human power is an attempt to influence how people live their lives. It refers, in the first place, not to the giving of orders and commands, but to the legitimation of human power.[43] Where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority is placed in an office that a person exercises for a time. The office transcends the particular person in it. Consequently, anyone who exercises (the role of) authority has the right not from himself /herself but from some other source. The critical question confronting the Christian church is: What is the source of its authority and how can it acquire legitimation?

During their history, the churches have claimed a divine source for their ecclesiastical authority. Appointed representa-

[41] Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority", *Between Past and Future* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961): 45.

[42] Gabriel Moran, "Is Religious Authority Possible in a Post-Critical Age", in *Power and Authority* (Lockport, Ill.: Christian Brothers Conference, 1976): 38. See also Moran, *The New Community*, pp. 75-93, and *Religious Body: Design for a New Reformation*, pp. 187-206.

[43] See Robert Johann, "Authority and Responsibility", in *Freedom and Man*, ed. John C. Murray (Los Angeles: J. F. Kennedy Memorial Library, 1965): 141-151. For an inadequate conceptualization of the question, see Richard Sennett, *Authority* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980). Sennett advocates a variant of an anarchist position. He outlines a variety of ways to bring about periodic disruption in the chain of command (which he identifies with authority) that will revise the terms in organizations (pp. 165-190).

tives were endowed with sacred powers "from on high." Historically, under-pinning these beliefs were exclusive Christian claims to "saving truths," which were mediated through the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The churches have largely survived on the basis of these assertions. But, they have become less and less defensible. Changing church structures depend upon, first, shifting and recycling some of these traditional premises. This would open the possibility of moving toward new and educationally defensible foundations in our Christian churches.

Early in the twentieth century, Dewey brilliantly demonstrated how education and democracy become mutually interdependent and co-extensive.[44] Education of its nature, he wrote, tends to democratize. In like manner, a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority and depends on the creative powers of education to give it a (voluntary) social cohesiveness and common purpose. The implications for the church seem obvious. If it wants to foster education, it needs to be founded on the democratic principle.

There are resources in the Christian tradition that can assist us in this undertaking. The concepts of mutuality and uniqueness, symbols of communion and center are basic Christian insights that point in the right direction. However, the task is more complex, and we need to learn democracy from creative social and political theories and experiments of our day.

Democracy is a form of associated living. It is a way of defining human relationships. As a form of government, it refers to (1) the exercise of power through a mode of interaction, and (2) the grounding and establishing of authority in an organization through the exchange of power. There is a network of connection within and between groups through which limited power is vested in a central ruling body. The central power acts and makes decisions on behalf of the other groups, but it is directly accountable to them. Powers are distinguished and diversified. And, it is through the interaction of these multiple centers of power that power is tamed, coercion reduced and freedom enhanced.[45]

In a democracy, authority is situated with the whole people and arises from the exchange between people. Its source is the full

[44] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). See especially Chapter 7, "The Democratic Conception in Education", pp. 81-99.

[45] See Robert Dahl, *After the Revolution: Authority in a Good Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970): 3-58, and *Polyarch: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). Dahl selects the word "polyarchy" to indicate rule by interacting groups.

range of human and non-human experience. Its essence is mutual responsibility and the give-and-take of a communal life. This prevents authority from being absolutized any place (or in anyone), and it allows people to become the authors of their own authority.

The Christian churches are in critical need of this democratic principle to restore their credibility and accountability. What is at stake is the very legitimacy of the institution and the right of the people to govern their own lives. Injecting democratic techniques into the current system leaves the hierarchial pattern intact. In contrast, a democratic church offers the possibility for a fundamental rearranging of power and human relations.

Within a democratically structured church, it is the process of education (i.e., the creative interaction between groups) that becomes the source of church authority,[46] and the dynamics for determining its specific form. The pattern emerges from the ecology of education, and the posture is one of intelligence. Men and women exercise the office of authority through the consent of the local ecclesia and the authority is always returned to the only source that can legitimize it, namely, the full life of the (church) body politic.

However, any church institution that aspires to this democratic form of life needs to meet head-on and challenge the caste categories that define it. The Christian churches are a prototype of a rigid caste system based on sexual discrimination. The classification clergy/lay is indicative of the deep structural problem and power relations in the church. The categories represent and perpetuate the present hierarchical and sexist pattern.[47] They set up distinctions and modes of behavior which inhibit democratic government and obstruct the educational process. In a democratic church, there are neither "clergy" nor "laity", but only multiple ministerial roles to be exercised by the whole ministerial community.

How the church governs, then, is crucial to the way we live and move and have our being. It is the key to what kind of social ethic she has, and what conditions she offers for social development. A test of her future (educational) effectiveness will be her

[46] This concept underlies the work of Harris S. Elliott. See *Can Religious Education Be Christian* (New York: Macmillan, 1940): 319+.

[47] See Letty Russell, "Women and Ministry", in *Sexist Religion and Women in the Church*, ed. Alice L. Hageman (New York: Association Press, 1974): 47-62, and Rosemary R. Ruether, *New Woman New Earth* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

ability to structure forms of life which reduce coercion and release communal freedom.

A second key test of education in the church is its ability to incorporate a reflective critical spirit. The church has never been completely at home with this "principle of freedom." Melchert had this in mind when he raised the question: "Does the church really want religious education?"[48] Melchert saw the contradiction between church rhetoric and reality: its substitution of various forms of indoctrination for education. Harrison Elliott has similar concerns when he wrote: "The function of religious education is not simply the transmission of an authoritative interpretation of the Christian religion, but the reinterpretation and enrichment of the Christian faith itself in and through an educational process."[49] Implicit in the church's practice has been the acknowledgment that a certain form of (religious) education poses a threat to traditional church objectives. Some fifty years ago, Coe drew the contrast in terms of transmissive versus creative education.[50] These polarities are as stark and unsolved today. What is at stake, however, is the very nature of the church's educational task.

There is a fundamental failure in the Christian church to rethink the very goals and purposes of their educational programming. This shows up repeatedly in what is called "catechetics" in Roman Catholicism and "Christian education" in Protestantism. The aim is always consistent: to socialize people for church membership, to enculturate them in the faith, to hand on the tradition, and to instruct them in what they ought to know. Irrespective of how critically and consciously this work may be undertaken, it is ultimately *educationally* self-defeating. It turns the mind of each denomination upon itself, giving it an introverted focus centered on a "back to basics" orthodoxy.

Asking the right question, instead of superimposing a ready-made scheme, may hold the key to the church reconstructing its educational mission. The question can be posed by paraphrasing Coe: Shall the primary purpose of church religious education be to hand on a religion or to facilitate lifelong development?[51] It may be objected that Coe has created a false dichotomy, but there is a crucial issue of intention at stake here which sets the direction for the church's educative work. If the church's purpose

[48] Melchert, pp. 12-22.

[49] Elliott, p. 64.

[50] George Albert Coe, *What Is Christian Education* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929).

[51] Coe, p. 29.

is to educate, its commitment is to growth from birth to death. When this objective is clear, it can then go on to raise and pursue the questions: What particular contribution can it make to the developmental journey? What are the stages on the journey? And, what material resources can be made available to facilitate it?

The Christian church serves as a shaping context for human becoming by offering stories and patterns of action that assist in negotiating life's passages.[52] It carries a reservoir of wisdom and a treasure of traditions that can make a unique and significant contribution to human development. Its profound and primordial vision lures the human to the center of self and the center of human community.[53] Its traditions of *Word*, *Sacrament* and *Prophecy* offer distinctive developmental possibilities.[54] Personal identity is constructed and deepened by inhabiting its symbolic life. Life's passages can be meaningfully negotiated with the assistance of a sacramental imagination and a sacred ritualization.[55] While the prophetic tradition taps our "divine discontent" and reminds us that to be personally holy/whole necessitates that we be also publicly just.[56]

Developmentally, Christian communities do not think themselves into moral goodness or cognitively elevate themselves into religious sensibilities. People do need instruction and assistance in clarifying their moral and religious attitudes/behaviors. However, their education in the moral and religious life will emerge, in large part, from living in a moral and religious community.[57]

[52] See David Burrell, "The Church and Individual Life", in *Toward Vatican III* (New York: Seabury, 1978): 124-133, ed. David Tracy with Hans Kung and Johann Metz.

[53] John Dunne, *The Reasons of the Heart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979).

[54] See Maria Harris, "Word, Sacrament, Prophecy", *Tradition and Transformation in Religious Education*, ed. Padraic O'Hare (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1979): 35-57.

[55] On the role of ritual in human development, see David Power and Luis Maldonado, *Liturgy and Human Passage* (New York: Seabury, 1979), Mark Searle, "The Journey of Conversion", *Worship*, 54, 1 (January 1980): 35-55; John Westerhoff and Gwen K. Neville, *Liturgy and Learning* (New York: Seabury, 1978), and Westerhoff, "The Liturgical Imperative of Religious Education", in *The Religious Education We Need*, ed. James Michael Lee (Mishawawaka, Ind.: Religious Education Press, 1977): 90ff; Aidan Kavanagh, "The Role of Ritual in Personal Development", in *The Roots of Ritual*, ed. J. Shaughnessy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973): 145-160; Donald E. Miller, "Moral Significance of Worship", *Religious Education* 75, 2, 1980: 193-203; Joanmarie Smith, "Celebration for the Left-Lobed Psyche", *The Living Light* 16, 1, 1979: 107-113.

[56] David Hollenbach, "Modern Catholic Teaching Concerning Justice", in *The Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Paulist, 1977): 207-231, ed. John Haughey. Hollenbach links a sacramental imagination to the work of public justice.

[57] See Craig Dykstra, "Sin, Repentance and Moral Transformation: Some Critical Reflections on Kohlberg", *The Living Light* 16, 4 (Winter 1979): 451-461.

Justice and holiness will be learned and deepened as the church community treats its communicants more justly and holy.

In the church's lived-life, nothing of ordinary experience should be too quickly dismissed or excluded from its course of study. The curriculum is the ecological context of people's lives — the stuff of their daily experience. Appropriate materials, which embody a Christian (and non-Christian) perspective, should be introduced through the appropriate teaching services and the vision brought to bear on human experience.

If the Christian story and vision, however, is to empower people in their lives, it needs the context of a *critically* reflective community.[58] This is a prerequisite for mature religious sensibilities today.[59] The reflective critical process keeps open, tolerant and non-dogmatic. Putnam notes, "Especially in religion, the great temptation is to play it safe. We remain naive, unquestioning, innocent and childlike. We achieve safety and security at the expense of growth, change and adventure."[60] On the other hand, Thomas Bissonnette writes, "The element of self and mutual criticism (enriched by criticism from those outside the group) is often a key to the health or weakness of a base community."[61] Without this critical spirit, the base community leaves itself open to the dangers of fundamentalism and fanaticism; its religious impulse could degenerate into idolatry and its vision into an ideology.

The educational process, then, allows "basic Christian communities" to become self-conscious, to personally and freely appropriate their religious traditions and to "own" their convictions as if for the first time. By being receptive to the existentially important questions and crises in people's lives, and by interpreting the religious significance of these passages, the church community can celebrate the meaning and significance of all of life's pilgrimage. When these conditions prevail, we can appropriately describe the local church as an ecology of human development and its lived-life as a demonstration of religious education.

In sum, then, we have observed the church as a "treasure in earthen vessels". Its riches are the gifts of a communal and critical

[58] See Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

[59] See Leon Putnam, "Venturing into Religious Maturity", *Intellect* (June 1978): 487-488 and Eugene Kennedy, "Religious Faith and Psychological Maturity", in *The Persistence of Religion* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973): 119-127, ed. Andrew Greeley.

[60] Putnam, p. 488.

[61] Bissonnette, p. 49.

life lived with significance and in dialectic with the public world. As its own distinctive religious traditions are made accessible to people in the context of their communal life, new growth possibilities emerge for loving and working, holding on and letting go, dying and rising. The rythm of our developmental journey confirms the paradox at the center of our religious lives. And hidden in the challenges of our human life-passages are the agenda for the church's religious education.

Dr. Kieran Scott is Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Education at St. Bonaventure University, New York.