

Chapter 3

CONTEXT:
Where Do We Educate?

“Context is everything.” She spoke the words with such conviction. I pressed her further. “What do you mean?” She said again, “Context is everything. Where we do something—the physical setting, the cultural setting, the time of day—all of these influence how we educate and what people learn.” The speaker was a former student who had returned to share some of her wisdom with one of my classes. Her place of ministry was a large inner-city African American congregation, and her audience in the class was primarily white suburban middle-class students. She was challenging them to be aware of the importance of context in education, to not assume that “one size fits all.”

CONTEXT refers to the settings, circumstances, and situations within which a particular event or happening occurs. This third building block calls our attention to the importance of the settings and environments within which education takes place. Too often in the church we take context for granted. We presume that certain settings are “educational,” mainly the church school, and seldom seem aware of the other contexts within which teaching and learning take place. The neglected physical condition of those places that we identify as educational also adds to this impression that we ignore context. I’ve been in too many church school classrooms that showed little evidence of any care or attention—paint was peeling; chairs and tables were broken; old papers were piled in bookcases; everything could have used a good cleaning. Nor do we seem to realize that context is more than just the physical space; it includes attitudes, emotions, relationships, cultural qualities, and many other factors that shape the environment.

We need to see the importance of context for the church’s educational ministry. My own understanding of this foundational building block has been greatly helped by the work of Elliot Eisner. In his book *The Educational Imagination*, he highlights issues of context in his discussion of what schools teach.¹ He says,

But schools teach much more—and much less—than they intend to teach. Although much of what is taught is explicit and public, a great deal is not. Indeed, it is my claim that schools provide not one curriculum to students, but three.²

He goes on to talk about the explicit, the implicit or hidden, and the null curriculum. The explicit curriculum refers to what is consciously and intentionally presented as the teachings of that school, the actual *content* we are teaching. The implicit curriculum is what a school “teaches because of the kind of place it is.”³ In other words, the context—the physical characteristics of the school building, the way the day is organized, the emotional environment, the way people relate to each other, and many other factors—teaches important lessons to students whether we are aware of it or not. And finally, the null curriculum refers to what schools do *not* teach. Maria Harris, in her discussion of Eisner’s work, describes it this way:

This is the curriculum that exists because it does not exist; it is what is left out. But the point of including it is that ignorance or the absence of something is not neutral. It skews the balance of options we might consider, alternatives from which we might choose, or perspectives that help us see. The null curriculum includes areas left out (content, themes, points of view) and procedures left unused (the arts, play, critical analysis).⁴

Eisner believes that the lessons the implicit and null curriculum teach, although often unintentional and unconscious, are among “the most important lessons a child learns.”⁵ What he challenges us to see is that the context itself teaches and therefore needs our attention.

I once heard the story of a little girl whose mother was a professional journalist and traveled a lot. The father performed most of the parenting functions for their daughter. One time the little girl was playing house. She was holding a doll, and someone asked her who she was. She replied, "I'm the father." When asked where the mother was, she said she was away writing a story. No one sat in a classroom and taught that little girl a formal lesson about how mothers work and fathers take care of children. It was her context that taught her this.

Context teaches in the church, too. Without ever saying a word, we teach what it means to be a Christian by the way we design our churches, by the way we welcome or do not welcome people into those churches, by the way we relate to each other as a church community, by who is allowed to speak and who isn't—the list could go on and on. Whether it is the appropriate lesson or not isn't the point. The point is that we are teaching something through our contexts. When only men are seen in the pulpit or in positions of leadership in the church, we are teaching something about the place of women in the Christian faith. When we remove children from the worship service on a regular basis, we are teaching them something about what it means to be a Christian. When our educational structures are designed to look like schools, we implicitly send a message about how we are supposed to learn to be a Christian.

The issue here is not that context is bad. Context is a necessary and basic part of education. The issue before us is *awareness*. Too often in the church we seem to ignore the importance of context and the key role it plays in our educating. We take certain contexts for granted (such as Sunday morning and a classroom) and assume that this is when religious education occurs. We miss all the other times and settings where education *is* occurring (such as the worship service, fellowship dinners, choir practice, a hunger walk, the home) and lose the opportunity to be more intentional about the ways in which these contexts assist us in our important task of educating disciples. It is important that we consider the building block of context, become aware of the settings we currently see as educational in the church, and give consideration to a broader understanding of context and *where* teaching and learning can and do occur in the community of faith.

Context: Sunday School

The response is almost always the same. When asked to name the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the term *Christian education*, most people say, "Sunday school." I have asked the question of students, of Christian education committees, of pastors, and of other folks, and the response is universal. The identification of Christian education with this one particular context is strong and pervasive.

Many of you reading this chapter probably responded in similar fashion. After all, some of us have been shaped and formed by the Sunday school. It is one of the primary contexts in which we have been taught about the Christian life. It has been an important setting where the Christian faith was explained and taught, shared and lived. I still name my junior high Sunday school teacher, Mrs. K., as one of the important influences in my own spiritual journey.

Originally established in the 1780s as a structure to educate working-class children in England, the Sunday school was soon exported to the United States and became a movement that played a role in the European settlement of this country. In its early years, it was an agency completely separate from the church. Only in the middle of the nineteenth century did the church adopt the Sunday school as its own agency for education.⁶ Since that time it has been seen by many as the major context for Christian education.

There have been contrasting images of the Sunday school in our society. As Jack Seymour describes it,

Throughout its two-hundred-year existence, the Sunday school has meant many things to many people. For some it is the evangelistic arm of the church, for others it is the context for serious study and instruction, and for still others it is an intimate, caring fellowship. Its life has engendered deep feelings of pride and caustic criticisms. Assessments of its work have always been varied. For every positive statement made about the Sunday school, there seems to be comparable criticism...The Sunday school has inspired extremes of feeling—sarcastic criticism and inordinate praise.⁷

These contrasting images were highlighted in a 1995 edition of *Church Educator* magazine when two articles about Sunday school appeared in the same issue. One was titled "Sunday School is *Not* the Answer," and the other dealt with "Growth Dynamics for Growing Church Schools."⁸ Clearly there are mixed feelings about Sunday school as a context for Christian education.

Whatever we feel about Sunday school, it is a part of the church's educational environment and, in many churches, provides a needed setting for introducing the Christian faith to the largest possible number of children, youth, and adults. It can also be a setting that provides important nurturing for people. There are Sunday school classes that become a "church within the church." I have witnessed this particularly in the lives of aging members of a congregation whose Sunday school class provides much of the needed pastoral care as they face the reality of loss of spouses and of the limitations that aging brings to physical capacities. My own family experienced this reality as we watched my mother's Sunday school class minister to her in deeply caring ways when my father died.

I believe we need to value this context for what it does and what it provides. It has been, and continues to be, a place of nurture for many people. It continues to provide an introduction to the faith for many. It is an accepted part of the educational ministry of many congregations. As D. Campbell Wyckoff says, we need to "respect the Sunday school for what it has been, what it is and does and for its potential future contribution; provide it with appropriate backing and fitting resources; and promote it realistically, claim for it neither more nor less than it can produce."⁹

Rather than continue to debate the merits of Sunday school, I invite us to accept it as a given. It is an established context that provides us with a time and place in the church for education. As Wyckoff suggests, we need to be realistic about what it can and cannot do as a context for religious education. We can't teach everything a person needs to know to be a faithful disciple in fifty minutes on Sunday morning. But we can provide some basic content. We also need to commit some resources to its work. Too often I hear of churches trying to solve

a budget crisis by eliminating money for education, specifically Sunday school. If this context is to be effective, we need to provide resources for it, including both money and people.

In working with this context for Christian education, however, we must also remember that "the Sunday school was never called to do the whole task of Christian religious education."¹⁰ The early leaders of Sunday school saw this context as only one of several within the church where people were shaped and formed in their faith journeys. Worship, preaching, Wednesday night Bible study, women's society, and fellowship times were all seen as important parts of the whole. There was even an understanding that the contexts that worked together to help educate people in the Christian faith went beyond the church walls. Referred to by Robert Lynn as an "ecology" of religious education contexts, this wider collection included revivals, church publications, the public school, church agencies and societies, denominational colleges and seminaries, and the family.¹¹

There are signs that this broader ecology has broken down and no longer provides the same widespread environment within which people are formed in the faith. Even within the church walls, we seem to have turned primarily to Sunday school as the chief context for educating Christians. Regular and ongoing Bible study, apart from the brief time available during the Sunday school hour, is disappearing from many church calendars. Women's groups committed to study and service no longer hold the place of prominence they once did in church life. Even fellowship times seem fewer and farther between as churches compete with the busy lifestyles of many of their members.

Although this old ecology has broken down, it is still important that we recognize the need for a variety of contexts, a broader base of environments and settings within which the educational ministry of the church takes place. The pervasive identification of Sunday school as synonymous with Christian education becomes a barrier to a broader vision. When "we equate Christian education with something that happens in a 'Christian education wing' of the church building, at a certain time on Sunday morning,"¹² we have greatly limited our ability

to recognize and use the wide variety of contexts available for the education of Christians. I believe that our call to educate and prepare Christians for living and serving in the world today challenges us to broaden our understanding of context and become aware of the multiple settings within which we teach and learn the faith. We need to create the best Sunday schools that we can. But we need to do more.

Context: A Wider Perspective

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9 RSV)

As I mentioned in chapter 1, I find many insights about education in this passage, one of my favorites in the Bible. In these words from Deuteronomy we hear not only *why* we are teaching—to help people learn to love God with their whole selves—but we also see some clues as to *where* we are to teach, which is just about everywhere. The writer challenged our ancestors in the faith to teach diligently and to do this by talking about this commandment in their homes and when they were engaged in the wider world (walking “by the way”). They were to keep these words before them in everything that they did, which meant that they were constantly engaging with this commandment, learning what it meant for their lives, and living accordingly. I call that education!

The whole of the biblical story suggests a broader understanding of context than that which seems to be operative in the church today. Schools are not mentioned in the Bible, nor would schools as we know them have existed at that time. What

our ancestors in the faith seemed to understand was that the whole of life provided a context for educating. This is particularly evident when we look at the New Testament and make note of the places where education, or leading people forth into the Christian life, took place. Jesus was especially creative when it came to context. Although we see him teaching in a synagogue (Lk. 4:31-37), we also find him teaching by a well (Jn. 4:1-42); on a mountain (Mt. 5:1-11); in a home (Lk. 10:38-42); during a banquet (Lk. 5:29-39); on a boat (Mk. 4:35-41); in the fields (Lk. 6:1-5); and on a walk (Lk. 24:13-35). It appears that our Christian story invites us to broaden our perspective when it comes to the settings and environments in which we educate.

What are some basic insights about context that can help us to broaden our perspective regarding this foundational building block of educational ministry? Though the following is certainly not an exhaustive list, let me name three such insights:

1. *It is the whole life of the congregation that teaches.*

This first insight calls us to see that it is the *congregation*, the whole church, that educates. It is not just those people called “teachers” working in places called “classrooms” who are educating. It is the total life of the community of faith, life that is lived both inside and outside the walls of the church building. Everything we do as a congregation teaches what it means to be a disciple of the Christ.

Maria Harris, a noted religious educator, provides us with some important perspective in this discussion about the congregation as a context for education. In her book *Fashion Me a People*, she talks about five basic ways, or “forms” as she calls them, through which the community of faith shares in life together. These forms include *koinonia* or fellowship, *leiturgia* or worship, *didache* or formal instruction and teaching, *kerygma* or proclamation, and *diakonia* or service and mission.¹⁵ Harris sees each of these as contexts in which we are “fashioning,” or educating the people of God.

In other words, education in discipleship occurs not only in the context of formal instruction in a church school classroom, but also in the midst of fellowship, whether we are gathered

for a potluck supper or participating in a family camp. It occurs in the context of worship, whether it is a Sunday morning service or a devotion time during a committee meeting. Education takes place when we are proclaiming the gospel, whether it is giving testimony during a service or voting as a church to take a stand for justice on a particular issue. And we learn about being Christian through the context of service, whether we are building a house for Habitat for Humanity or sponsoring a walk for hunger. In each of these contexts, education is taking place, and people are being formed in their faith.

The challenge for the church is to pay attention to each of these contexts. Remember our discussion earlier in this chapter about the implicit curriculum? Everything we do as a congregation and every place we do it *is* educating, whether we are aware of it or not. It seems to me that if we are going to take seriously the context building block of educational ministry, we will start with an awareness of all the places and settings within which we interact as a community of faith. We will look at our worship services, our fellowship times, the mission and service projects in which we engage, the committee work we do. We will become aware of what is already being learned through all these settings and how these learnings do or do not help people grow in their discipleship. We will become more intentional about what happens and how it happens in each of the contexts of congregational life, knowing that in all places and in all ways we are forming the people of God.

2. *There is more than meets the eye in a given context.*

Certainly what we see when we walk into a particular context (be it a church school classroom, a sanctuary, a church camp fellowship hall, or wherever) immediately tells us something about the identity and values of that community of people. Broken furniture, crumbling plaster, musty smells, and dirty floors send a message about what being a Christian means in this place. The presence or absence of symbols (e.g., a cross, banners, candles, pictures) and even the arrangement of chairs or pews communicate a vision of the Christian life in implicit ways. We certainly need to attend to these important physical characteristics of a context, but, as the old saying goes, there is

more here than meets the eye. Other characteristics of context beyond the physical need our attention.

A. EMOTIONAL AND ATTITUDINAL NATURE OF CONTEXTS

The first of these is the emotional and attitudinal nature of the contexts within which we educate. I often hear people talk about how they “feel at home” in a particular place, or don’t “feel safe” in a certain setting even when there is no clear evidence of physical threat. I think at these moments people are talking about the emotional and attitudinal qualities of a context. Paying attention to these qualities is as important as attending to the physical condition of a particular space.

Space where we feel unwelcome, feel afraid to express who we are and what we believe, or feel threatened by those who seem to hold power is not space where much learning can take place. In such an emotional environment we are too busy trying to protect ourselves to really be open to learning and growing. The sad thing is that such space is not unknown in the church. I have been in congregations where I have not felt welcomed, not because people said I wasn’t wanted, but because they did nothing to include me. I have sat in church school classes afraid to speak my beliefs for fear of being ridiculed or put down by both teacher and students. And the ridicule does not have to be obvious. It can be as subtle as the teacher rolling his or her eyes when someone begins to speak, as though to say, “There he goes again.” These are not moments or places where much helpful learning takes place!

What helps to shape good emotional and attitudinal space, space where learning is enhanced? I believe there are at least three key qualities of such a space. These are hospitality, openness, and a sense of safety.¹⁴ Hospitality refers to the act of receiving others with an attitude of warmth and care; it means to make people feel welcome. In educational contexts, it also means to welcome new thoughts and ideas. We encourage people to share different perspectives and views and to receive these, not as threats, but as opportunities to learn and grow. The biblical tradition is rich with images of hospitality, of welcoming the stranger. As the author of Hebrews says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that

some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb. 13:2). As we seek to learn and grow in our Christian faith, an attitude of hospitality opens us to the new work God may be wanting to do in our own lives, both personally and as the church.

The quality of openness calls our attention to the need for a context marked by an attitude of freedom and mutuality. People feel free to share what they are thinking and feeling, to ask questions, to wrestle with hard issues without fear of attack or ridicule. Open space calls us "to remove the impediments to learning that we find around and within us."¹⁵ One of the impediments often at work in educational settings is the fear of appearing ignorant. It makes it difficult to say, "I don't know," or "I don't understand." Yet learning begins with the ability to say, "I don't know, but I would like to find out." Another impediment I see at work in the church is what I call "authoritarianism," the need on the part of some clergy, educators, teachers, and parents to be the authority and have all the right answers. They create contexts where there is little freedom to explore, to differ, or to try out new ideas. In such a context, learning is certainly limited, if not blocked altogether.

A sense of safety is the final quality I want to mention. We hear a lot about "safe space" in our world today. As a society we struggle daily with the violence that has moved within the very walls of our schools and public places, onto our highways, and within our homes. I believe that it goes without saying that physical violence simply has no place in the community of faith, as it should have no place in the wider society. But there are other ways we do violence besides the physical, and these need our attention too. When we belittle a person, make fun of him or her, or respond with sarcasm and ridicule, we are perpetuating violence, and there should be no place for this in the educational contexts of the church. Contexts where we seek to nurture disciples must be considered safe spaces, free from violence of any kind, shaped instead by grace and loving care.

B. THE CULTURAL NATURE OF CONTEXTS

"Learning is always done in a cultural context."¹⁶ With these words, Ella Mitchell reminds us of the importance of culture in our educational efforts. The contexts within which we educate

are always shaped by the culture within which they are rooted. A congregation located in a small, midwestern farming community settled by German immigrants does not share the same cultural context as a large, urban Chinese American congregation located in a major West Coast city. There are present within each of these settings certain perspectives on the world, certain understandings of who people are, and certain patterns of teaching and learning that seem natural and appropriate. What "works" educationally in one setting will not necessarily be useful in the other. Again, we have to set aside our one-size-fits-all perspective in order to educate in ways that will engage people and help them grow.

Mitchell suggests that different communities have always used "cultural vehicles"¹⁷ to assist them in their teaching tasks. It is when we overlook these culturally sensitive approaches that we can find ourselves struggling in the educational task. In an example from her own cultural context, Mitchell suggests that the African American church loses some of its educational vitality when it relies too much on printed material and forgets one of its central cultural vehicles, that of storytelling, a teaching tool rooted in the rich oral tradition of the African community.

To use stories and illustrations primarily from city life when working with children in a farming community is to ignore the significance of cultural vehicles. To have only pictures of European Americans on the walls of a Sunday school classroom in a Chinese American congregation is to ignore the significance of cultural vehicles. When we are sensitive to the cultural nature of our contexts, we will look for those cultural vehicles that can engage people where they are and enable them to hear the gospel and its meaning for their lives and to grow in faith.

3. *Context stretches beyond the doors of the church building.*

As was noted earlier, it is the whole life of the congregation that teaches. We now expand on this truth to note also that a congregation not only shares life within the walls of a given church building, but also experiences life as a scattered people beyond the doors of the church building. Sometimes it is easy

to overlook the life beyond the church and forget that this life also provides us with contexts for educating in faith. In fact, I propose that two of the most important, yet often overlooked, contexts for Christian education are located outside the church walls. These are (1) the home and family and (2) mission and service.

“For better or worse, our families have more influence on our character, values, motivations, and beliefs than any other institution in society, including churches and schools.”¹⁸ For all our efforts in the church, family religious experiences are key to our children’s faith development, and research indicates that family religious activity within the home seems to be declining from one generation to the next.¹⁹

We hear lots of reasons for the family’s neglect of religious education within the home. With busy schedules, both parents working, and so many activities for both adults and children, there simply doesn’t seem to be enough time in the day. It seems that the days when families shared most of their meals together, with time for grace before and conversation about all kinds of topics during, are gone. The important religious holidays like Christmas and Easter are lost in a sea of commercialism that few families seem able to overcome.

However, I don’t want to make this a “blame the parents” issue. I think that the church has played a role in this decline of religious activity within the home by ignoring the importance of the home and family as a context in our religious development. A friend of mine is a minister to families and children in a local church. One of the constant concerns parents bring to her is their struggle with talking about faith issues with their children. They don’t know what to do or how to do it, and more often than not, the church has not helped them in their task. The most popular events she holds are those workshops where she works with parents on such topics as how to pray with children, how to answer those difficult questions only children can ask (like, did their pet cat go to heaven when it died?), or how to explain, in a way a child can understand, the meaning of important theological concepts like baptism, communion, resurrection, and so on. She also finds parents wanting help on how to make Christmas and Easter meaningful religious holidays rather than the commercial icons they have become.

When we expand our vision to those contexts outside the walls of the church building, we see the home and family as a vital setting for Christian education and know that we need to work at engaging this context in creative and meaningful ways. It begins with the acknowledgment that when a baby is born, the parents do not receive a manual that tells them how to go about the religious education of this child, even though they will be their child’s primary religious teachers. They need help and assistance from the very beginning, and the wider church can be there, providing guidance and helping parents create a setting in their home for the religious nurture of their child.

An example of how we might approach this in the Christian community can be seen when we look at what those in another religious body are doing. The Central Agency for Jewish Education in the St. Louis area has developed a program called “Our Jewish Home,” which seeks to address the issue of parents as religious educators.²⁰ Based on the Missouri Parents as Teachers program, this effort at claiming the home as a primary context for religious education uses trained lay teachers who work with parents of preschool children, going into the home to help parents learn prayers, special rituals, songs, and other activities that they can use in the home to help teach and preserve their Jewish heritage. The families also take part in group educational activities with others in the program. I believe that, with a little thought and effort, local churches, perhaps joining with others, could draw on this idea. They could develop programs appropriate for their settings that would take seriously the home as a context for Christian education and provide the resources to help parents and extended families in their efforts.

The other context that moves us beyond the church walls in our educational efforts is the context of mission and service. I think we would all agree that the church is called to be in mission and service in the world. But I’m not sure that we often realize that the mission and service in which we engage are also important contexts for teaching and learning.

I believe there is little argument that experiential education is a vital educational model. It is one thing to be told about something, to be given facts and information. It is quite another to actually engage these facts and information and learn

how to use them. For example, we can talk all we want in a church school classroom about feeding the hungry; but we move to another level of learning by actually being involved in a feeding ministry and encountering the poor and hungry in our own neighborhoods. In the church we need to move beyond seeing our mission and service as simply ways to “do good” and also claim these contexts as important settings for learning about what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

A new model of teaching and learning that has recently found its way into both the public and religious education arenas is a model called “service-learning.”²¹ It is an approach to education that seeks to understand and use service as an important context for learning. Rather than understanding service as just things that we do to help others, this educational process also sees service as a way of learning and an avenue for growth and development. Because research supports the claim that service that is undertaken not only for the purpose of doing good but also as a means of learning *does* help persons grow and mature in their faith,²² it seems vitally important that the church see beyond its walls and acknowledge mission and service as a context for Christian education. It needs to involve its people in such contexts and seek not only to serve, but to be intentional about the learning that can occur.

Summary

In many ways, I feel that I have been stating the obvious in this chapter, but often it is the obvious that we have ceased to see. Like driving a familiar route to home or work, we stop “seeing” the scenery. The same thing happens with context. Because we take it so for granted, we stop seeing this important aspect of educational ministry and reflecting on it. When we fall victim to the “tyranny of the obvious,” we lose the ability to select and shape the contexts of education in ways that truly assist the teaching and learning we want to happen.

While context may not be everything, as my former student claimed, it *is* a vital factor in our educational efforts and a building block to which we must attend. Contexts *do* teach, and the condition and quality of our educational contexts *do*

matter. In the church, we need to think about the contexts we use, beginning with the church school but moving beyond to see the breadth and depth of contexts available to us for nurturing people in the growth of their Christian identity. As we expand our vision of *where* educational ministry occurs, we expand the opportunities we have to teach and learn, to grow in wisdom, and to become the disciples we are called to be.

Reflection and Application

The following exercises are offered to assist readers in their engagement with the ideas presented in this chapter.

1. Drawing on examples from the chapter and adding others that you think of, make a list of all the contexts for Christian education that you see your congregation using. With this list, do the following:
 - a. Put a check mark by each of the contexts that you believe the majority of the congregation would clearly identify as a context for Christian education.
 - b. Put a minus sign (-) beside each of the contexts that you believe the majority of the congregation would not clearly identify as a context for Christian education.

Study the list. What does it tell you? What might be done in your congregation to increase awareness of the importance of context and of the variety of contexts available?
2. Make a list of those contexts for religious education that you believe your congregation is not employing or using in any intentional way. What would it take to begin engaging those contexts? What could you, as an individual or a committee, do? What would be a first step? What would need to follow that first step? Outline a brief strategy for engaging new contexts in your particular congregation.
3. Take a walking tour of your church facility, doing this as a group if at all possible. Before starting the

tour, imagine that you are a first-time visitor and know nothing about this congregation, perhaps even know little about Christianity. Enter this experience with all your senses open, being as aware as you can of what is around you. The following suggestions are offered to guide your exploration:

- a. Begin at the point where a person would first come in contact with your facility, maybe a sign down the street or the entrance to the church parking lot. Take note of your surroundings. What do you see and hear? What do the surroundings suggest to you about this congregation, its identity, and its understanding of itself?
- b. Enter the building by whatever door is convenient. Again, pause and take note of this spot. What do you see? How does it seem to welcome you? What and how do you feel as you approach it? What does it seem to say about the congregation's understanding of itself and the people who come here?
- c. Move slowly through the building, making note of signs and symbols and ways in which you are directed through the space. Pause regularly to note what you are seeing, hearing, feeling. Limit talking among the group as much as possible so that you can focus on the impressions. Feel free to enter rooms, to sit in chairs or pews, and to experience the environment as fully as you can.
- d. As you move through the building, keep asking the following questions:
 - (1) What does being a Christian seem to mean in this place?
 - (2) What does context seem to tell you about these people? What seems to matter to them? What seems to be overlooked?

When the tour is complete, gather as a group and discuss the following:

- i. What was this experience like? What did you notice? What did you learn about context?

- ii. Think about the qualities of hospitality, openness, and safety. How would you rank the space you just toured in terms of these qualities?
- iii. Think about the cultural nature of space. What "cultural vehicles" for teaching and learning about Christianity did you see present in the space?
- iv. What have you learned about context, and how would you go about sharing these learnings with the rest of the congregation?