Ordinary Christians Exploring Christianity:  
Reflections on a diocesan discipleship course  
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1. A brief history
- Exploring Christianity (EC) is a discipleship course that was developed by the Diocese of Bath and Wells and Trinity College, Bristol, in the mid-2000s.
- Its aims are to:
  - Deepen faith
  - Explore the Christian tradition
  - Equip for ministry
- The Diocese of Exeter bought into the course in c.2009 with a view to making it the default discipleship course for all parishes, mission communities and deaneries.
- SWMTC was contracted to run the course from August 2011, taking over from a part-time diocesan officer. It has been a popular discipleship course in the diocese, though interest has tailed off over the last 12 months. At its peak, some 500 students were involved in EC (including two shorter modules, Exploring Advent/Lent).
- The decline in participation is partly due to the increased interest in Pilgrim, and a sense in which the lay people who want a course like EC have probably done it, so it’s time for something new (or different, at least).

2. The structure of EC
- EC consists of six modules, which are delivered by a local tutor in 10-week blocks. The shortest overall completion time is two years, but groups tend to spread it out over three years (i.e. two modules per session). Some take even longer (one group has completed a module a year for the last five years. It started its final module in September!).
- The structure is non-linear, and groups can decide which order they study in. However, the standard running order has been:
  - Spirituality and prayer: an introduction to spiritual traditions within the Anglican Church and beyond, including Celtic, the Desert Fathers and mysticism. The module is also a chance for participants to reflect on their own spirituality, and discover what nourishes them.
  - Introduction to the New Testament: exactly what the title suggests! This module looks especially closely at Mark’s Gospel and the Pauline corpus, with particular attention to 1 Corinthians.
  - Questions of Faith: an introduction to Christian doctrine, including Christology, soteriology and providence. This module seeks to set the development of doctrine into a historical context, and raises contemporary questions about dogmatics.
  - Reshaping the church: a study of ecclesiology and mission, through the lens of church history. This is the most ‘churchy’ module, and encourages participants to think about how their own church participates in God’s mission (there is even a section on Local Ministry Groups).
  - Introduction to the Old Testament: like Intro to NT, this offers a general introduction to the Hebrew Bible, which is rather a whistle-stop tour: creation narratives, story of early Israel, Monarchy, Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs and a general session on theology of the OT.
  - Challenging Choices: a final module on ethics, which is intended to provide participants with a chance to ask what difference their study of Christian Scripture and traditions makes to the way they approach tough ethical issues.

3. A brief critique
- There is much to commend EC: it is well-written, was very well produced when initially launched, encourages deeper engagement with core theological sub-disciplines, is (broadly) accessible, and follows a clear structure.
- Weaknesses include the assumption that knowledge is acquired then applied (see, e.g., Challenging Choices). This is reflected in the module aims, which focus on the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, as if discipleship is primarily an intellectual exercise.
The use of the Bible warrants closer examination. Are two quite short modules sufficient to empower students in their handling of biblical texts? Should study of the Old Testament not precede study of the New Testament? Does more time need to be spent providing students with hermeneutic models so that they can ‘relate the Bible to [their] experience of every-day life’ (cf. Holgate & Starr 2006)?

A similar question could be raised about the other modules. For example, Reshaping the Church offers very little content about, or opportunity to inhabit, the distinctive character of Anglicanism, yet it asks participants to engage critically with their contemporary ecclesial context. Is it thereby guilty of some of the failings of the contemporary church (cf. Heard 2013: 69)?

The course is very wordy – something that proved especially off-putting in parishes where literacy rates are low. It perpetuates a sense in which theological education is for an elite; that unless you can read well, and enjoy books, you will not have the opportunity to participate more deeply in God’s life. But actually, such participation involves ‘searching for new and deeper ways of belonging together, new ways of speaking’ which ‘fight injustice’ (cf. Radcliffe 2005: esp. pp 156-163).

The course’s structure has become more problematic over time, as participants have become more accustomed to consuming information in smaller chunks, usually online (consider, for example, that 64pc of content viewed online in 2014 was video. This is projected to be 69pc by 2017 and 80pc by 2019 – Cisco 2015). This poses a different challenge, which is to find ways of living in communities of learning in the midst of new technology, making the most of the opportunities it presents, but not allowing our use of it to impair our full humanity (cf. Greenfield 2014, esp. chs 17 – 19). I believe this is a potent challenge for those with responsibility for discipleship education in the Church.

Concluding remarks

Discipleship education cannot be understood instrumentally: it is not important because of what it leads to, but because it presents an opportunity to form communities of learners, who share hospitality and prayer, as well as an educational experience. For most EC groups, it is the group that matters, not the content. (This is a microcosm of the challenge facing the C of E today – to resist instrumentalism and live in the midst of an eschatological horizon; in short, to recover our essence – cf. Resourcing Ministerial Education GS 1979, proposal 12).

Discipleship education needs to adopt forms of communication that are accessible, without denigrating the richness of the physical encounter or the experience of coming together to inhabit Christian Scripture and tradition as the body of Christ.

The key to discipleship training is the tutors/group facilitators/leaders: those who set up the conditions in which others can flourish in their faith, and in their humanity. These people need to be wise judges, who discern what is needed in a given context, and have the skills to provide or facilitate it. So, for example, the best EC tutors are those who sit lightly to the text, and are able to bring it to life in fresh, exciting, and context-specific ways.

This involves more than simply providing a mixed economy of courses, and still less favouring one course over all others. It involves investing in the formation of discipleship trainers/tutors/guides, who work at a local level to discern what is suitable, and establish opportunities to provide it.

References

Church of England, 2014, Resourcing Ministerial Education in the Church of England (GS 1979), available online at: https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2140023/gs%201979%20-%20resourcing%20ministerial%20education%20task%20group%20report.pdf last visited 09.02.16.


