

The Beginnings of Theological Reflection in EfM

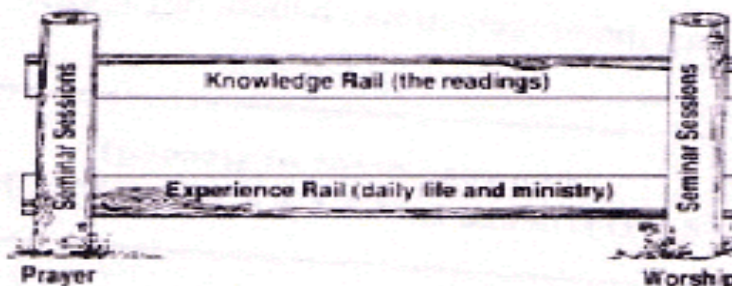
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In 1975 I was working in the Diocese of Alabama half time as the resource person for Christian Education. The other half of my time I worked as Administrative Assistant for the Association for Creative Change. The latter was an organization that was involved in training and accrediting trainers in Human Relations, Organization Development, and Conflict Management. I had been trained and accredited by this organization in these areas.

I enjoyed both jobs, but I was feeling a great yearning to do something more meaningful. I felt the need for additional theological education even though I knew that ordination was not the right track for me. I had been searching around for the right place to acquire this knowledge and at just that time the Rev. Dr. Charles Winters came to visit in our Diocese and told the Bishop and some of the staff about a new program he was working on. At that moment it was known unofficially as Theological Education by Extension. Charles had been my Bishop's professor in seminary and also the professor of my former husband so he was known and respected by those of us who attended that meeting. As he described the program he led us to look at the Baptismal Covenant and mentioned that we could envision ministry in three different ways. The ministry *to* the church which is primarily the work of the ordained, the ministry *in* the church which is the work of the ordained and all the many lay persons who were active in various jobs in the parish, and the ministry *of* the church, which was the work of all the members out in the world.

It was this latter ministry for which his program, officially titled *Education for Ministry*, was designed. He then described a two-rail fence model of education.



The top rail symbolized ‘content’, or the material that would be contained in a lecture, or, in EfM, in the readings. But this alone is not truly education. We have only to think of doctors or airplane pilots to know that simply having read ‘the material’ is not enough. One must have *experience* and put the theoretical information together with it for real education to take place. The bottom rail in the fence model stands for this experience. The fence posts stand for the process that links the two together. In the EfM program, small seminar groups were to be the fence posts, and the process in them was to be ‘theological reflection’.

I knew immediately that it sounded like something that I wanted very much to do. As Charles described it, however, the process he wanted people to use for reflection sounded like one that needed development and people trained in doing it.

When Charles had been in Alabama we were talking in the vestibule of the Diocesan Center waiting for a rain shower to pass over. I said to him, “if you ever need a good assistant, call me”. And then I forgot all about having said that as I worried him about the training during telephone calls. He, of course, was working like a slave trying to get the material written.

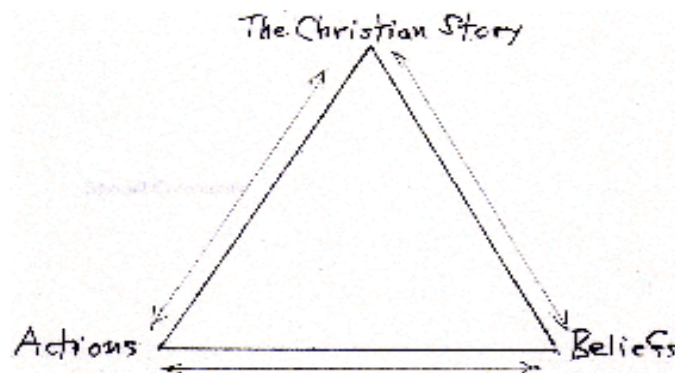
Imagine my surprise when in November I received a telephone call from the then Dean of the seminary Dr. Urban T. Holmes. (Better known to all as Terry) He asked if I would interested in coming to talk to them about a job working for the EfM program, as Director of Training and Program . At that point Charles had a part time secretary, and she was the person who had the task of typing the manuscripts and keeping up with all the other office work.

In January I made the trip to Sewanee and talked to Charles and Dean Holmes about this job. It was clear that I knew what I thought was needed and so they believed in me enough to offer me the job as of July 1 of 1976. Obviously, I said “yes”. I knew that I had some ideas about what the training should be but no clear step by step way to go about it. The experiential model of education had four steps: Experience, Identify,

Analyze, and Generalize. This was how I planned to work with the groups.

The instruction I was given was first and foremost Charles' desire that people use the material they were studying to inform their own lives and help them know if they were being faithful in making the decisions that would shape their actions. First, I knew that we must have a way for people to form themselves into a group that was trusting before they would be willing to talk about their own lives to see whether they were being faithful. I had worked with storytelling before and thought that such a process would develop trust among the members. I decided to call the stories 'spiritual autobiographies' not because I wanted people to talk only about the churchy parts of their lives but because I wanted to focus their attention on the fact that *all* parts of our lives were related to our spirit. This would help people to realize that reflecting on very ordinary decisions could indeed be fruitful.

I got another important tool that I modified from one by my good friend, the Rev. Harry Pritchett. It was a model, triangular in shape, that named each point of the angles in the following way:



(1) our Christian story, (2) my actions, and (3) my professed beliefs. These were all connected. I could check my actions against my professed beliefs to see if they were consistent, and check both against the Christian story to see if they were consistent with it.

The term 'critical incident' as a way for people to begin to examine their own lives was taken from CPE. I think it was a poor term to use since most people didn't recognize that 'critical' came from the Greek word *krisis*, which means decision, which is what we

wanted them to look at — a specific decision they had made that they could reflect on.

It soon became obvious to me after working with only one or two groups that we had to find a way to work that neither allowed people to try to be problem solvers for others, or to get too heavily into a psychological frame of reference. This was not easy. It was at this point that I realized we needed to make each person's story one that could be identified with by the other members of the group, and then used by each person as a learning about their own individual life. For this reason I asked each person who shared a story to identify the feelings and the thoughts about it separately. Thoughts about a particular story were those of the person who experienced it, but feelings could be generalized among the other members of the group too. Therefore, we were going to begin the reflection based on the common feelings. And we used a metaphor to move from the feelings we shared to a piece of the Tradition which seemed similar.

I started the first trainings that I did, using a story from my experience, and then I asked them questions and allowed discussion to follow with no sense of a process (which I was aware of, but had not described to them) except their interest. Then when we had finished I led them back through what we had done and showed that we had, in fact, just done a TR. We identified the process then through looking at our own experience of it. Most often I had the help of newsprint on which I drew the triangle and explained how it worked. Then we took turns with each having a chance to work with another story and also took turns using the questions I had suggested to them.

In doing things this way, I also had lots of comments from them about what might be helpful to them and what might be confusing. We learned an enormous amount together. In fact, had it not been for all the people who participated in the earliest trainings we would never have come to the place we had by the time I had left Sewanee.

As time went along and I continually added what I was learning to the process it was modified and different ways of approaching the way of doing a TR became possible. The Issue method began to develop. The triangle, which was a mainstay, needed to have an

additional dimension which helped people to acknowledge the way in which the culture surrounding them affected their understandings. The importance of this was borne in for me by traveling to places all over the U.S. and also outside our country. The first place that this became so apparent to me was a trip to Nicaragua where the Bishop was an American from South Carolina and thought that this might be just the way to train some of his people for indigenous ministries. In addition to the difficulties with language, the life there was entirely unlike what many of us are accustomed to. This was the first but not the only time I was faced with a different culture unlike our own. There was also work in Western Canada, Alaska, and of course, most importantly Australia.

It did not take long for the program to grow at a most amazing rate. It seemed to be the right thing for the time. After only a year I was so over-booked that I had a summer when I was in Sewanee only 7 days total. At that point I had to have help and Charles suggested that I train some people to assist me in training mentors. I was very careful to invite people who I knew had some training and educational background. Among the first were John de Beer, Rick Brewer, and Betsy Poist. John became almost as busy training as I was before he ever moved his family to Sewanee and became Director of Training when I left.

To this point in the program's life there was nothing written for use in training since I spent all my time on the road doing it. In a way I am very glad that was the case. Although it was difficult it also made great flexibility necessary and there never was a time when people all over were not entering into, modifying, and sharpening the TR process. It was really understood that this was a collaborative process to have disciplined conversation among people who became more thoughtful about their lives as ministries in the world around them.