

Seasons

Theme based reflections and outreach actions in ministry groups
The Word - Inform - Pray – Reach out - Celebrate



Season of Learning

– to learn is to question, and to question is to learn

On learning

Facts, figures and thoughts from Peter Heazlewood

Welcome to the Season of Learning – the continuing adventure that is the Seasons journey.

One of the challenges in this process is to decide on a subject that we can base our season around. We've had healing, hope, peace, homelessness, belonging and now learning. It's easy to get excited about exploring each topic, though I must admit that some are (on the surface) easier to work with than others. Some are obvious starters whilst some take effort to work with.

So, where do we start with the subject of Learning?

In a recent conversation I was asked “What’s the Season of Learning all about?” I was put on the spot so to speak. What the heck *is* the Season of Learning all about? What does it mean? How can we learn anything or motivate ourselves to do anything simply by saying “Welcome to the Season of Learning”?

My off the cuff response to the question was something along the lines of “Well ... we will learn things about ourselves and about our world by asking questions”. “Questions like?” I continued, “What as individuals or as a faith community are we called to do?” “What is our role in the world?” “Where are we going?” “How will we get there?” “What is our place in the world?” “What is our place in the community”. At no notice, I reckon I was able to come up with some pretty good questions and a good basis for learning and for what I hope will be an interesting season.

Those who have followed the Seasons journey to date will know that I like to include quotations from a range of sources – intellectuals, world leaders, inspirational movers and shakers. On this occasion I’ll draw from a quotation which I don’t mind at all. In fact I made it up myself:

“A growing and learning community is not one that has all of the answers, but in fact has some of the questions. To learn is to question, and to question is to learn”.

Peter Heazlewood

So, I think that the central cog in the machine that will be our Season of Learning is in fact, to question. I hope that across the season we’ll have an opportunity to raise many questions, consider responses and learn through the process.

India

Some of you will know that I was lucky enough recently, to go to India. I was keen to write about India in the context of learning because it’s a place where I expected to (and did) learn a lot.

For the short period of time I was there, I was exposed to noise, people, traffic, mayhem, rubbish and much social challenge sitting along-side places of serenity and peace. Those of you who’ve been there will understand as I now do, that India (and in fact much of the world) is very different than our little corner of Melbourne.

Invariably, travel to far off places provides us with an opportunity learn a lot about life. So, here are some the learnings I have taken away from India:

- We all don’t live the same way
- We don’t all believe in the same things
- There are those who have lots of stuff, and those that have nothing
- People have varying approaches and beliefs in life
- People have different expectations in their lives
- People respond differently to people who are different

But wait a minute! Haven't I just described the same sorts of things about our own lives and our own community? That's a learning in itself! Maybe in comparing a community that is so different to ours (like India) we learn that in fact that it is in many respects, similar to ours (though there are fewer elephants here).

I learned that despite the radical differences in culture and environment there are common 'core wants, needs and expectations'. I learned that whilst India (and places like it) may appear to Westerners to have insurmountable social challenges (and in many respects I'm sure it does), it is graced with family, community and social networks of support that are quite different to our own. Perhaps we could learn much about supporting each other (our families and communities) by observing and learning from places like India.

Whilst on the road between Agra and Jaipur I saw what I reckon was the most stunning thing I've ever seen. I've chosen it as a bit of symbol (or primary image) for the Season of Learning.

It's the Chand Baori step-well near the city of Jaipur. Built in about 800 AD, the step-well consists of 3,500 elaborately arranged steps descending just over 30 meters into the ground to a small pool of water. It is one of the deepest and largest step-wells in India. It was simply one of the most unexpected, unusual and most beautiful things I have ever seen.

But what did I learn from this amazing thing – this unbelievable step-well?



For me, the well symbolizes the explosion of possibilities that present themselves in the learning process - through seeing, experiencing and reflecting.

The well is functional and beautiful. It has been created with imagination – yet it is so obvious. It is confusing, yet makes so much sense. It is wildly elaborate, yet absolutely ordered. It is a miracle of mathematics, architecture and engineering and a gift of art and beauty. It is elaborate and excessive though without the well, many would die. It is unexpected, though its been there for 1200 years.

Possibly the greatest learning though for me is that to use the well, there are a thousand choices and decisions to make even though everyone who uses it is going to the same place – to the water.

Maybe learning is a bit like that? We take different experiences and learn from each. We make decisions - and they are all different. We have options and choices but in a sense, as we learn, we are all headed in the same or a similar direction.

That word 'Learning'

In putting together some artwork and visuals to display in the church over the Season of Learning, Sharlene put together a very clever graphic using the letters of the word LEARNING. It looks like this:

*visua**L***
***E**xperience*
*he**A**r*
***R**eflect*
*discussio**N***
***I**magination*
*actio**N***
***G**od*

Everyone is welcome to use the letters in the word as they wish and choose different words to make up the letters, but I reckon that these are a pretty good range of words that we can use as a springboard, and which can assist us as we move through the Season of Learning.

So here's my 'take' on what these words might mean. For each word, I've also included a question or questions you might like to consider individually or in a group:

Visual – Keeping our eyes open. Learn by opening our eyes and all of our senses to what happens around us. By not doing this, we close off opportunities to learn. By opening our eyes (actually and metaphorically) we open ourselves to learning.

Can you identify situations where you've sensed that eyes have been closed intentionally? What was the situation? What happened?

Experience – Learning from the things that happen to us – the good and the bad.

What for you was an experience that resulted in you learning an important lesson?
What happened? What was the learning?

Hear – Listening to others. Hear and learn from the voices of praise and the voices of celebration. Also, hear and learn from the voices of despair and the voices of need.

Have you ever heard anything e.g. said, sung or otherwise, that led to a significant learning for you? Tell us about that.

Reflect – Think about the things we experience. Be thoughtful about our learnings considering differing options, angles and possibilities.

What situation do you find helpful to reflect in?
Is there something you do that allows you time to reflect?

Discussion – A great opportunity to expand learning comes through discussion. Talking, comparing views and sharing experiences in formal or informal discussion can only make us wiser.

If you disagree with what is said in a discussion, do you still learn from it? If so, what do you learn?

Imagination – Responding creatively and with imagination can expand our learnings immeasurably. Imagining and dreaming requires us to consider things we learn and may actually change or re-invent them, deepen our understanding or simply confuse us. What was narrow and colourless, may in fact be expansive and multi-coloured!

Recount (and share) a situation where you've done something creative (or imaginative) and have learned from it.

Action – Learning provides an opportunity for us to take action. This is consistent with one of the key aspects of the Seasons journey 'Reach out'. It is also key in the message of the Gospel. I like this. Mission is our calling. Giving is our calling.....and in giving we receive (we learn).

What did you learn when you undertook some form of outreach or mission? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about others?

God – We are a Christian community. At the core of what we do as a community and as individuals *is* God. A few years ago, we started the Seasons journey. The ignition-point for this journey was a recognition that we need to engage in prayer more often and more deeply – that we need to pray, to communicate, to be in dialogue (individually and as a community) with God.

This is our faith journey and we are learning continually along the way.

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The Gospel

In preparing this, I was having a think about the Gospel and how the life, death and resurrection of Christ speaks to us about learning.

If learning is something that stems from asking questions, then maybe the Gospel is the *greatest* place for learning. Consider that Christ was born into a world of convention, practices, rules, customs and conditions that were rigid and binding. Part of the Gospel message for me is about being set free. Its about having freedom to make decisions on the journey (remember my step-well?) - and to continually learn from them. Its about asking questions - questioning the convention, questioning the rigid customs and beliefs and importantly, looking at things differently – or learning.

Jesus did that – he ate with the sinners, washed the feet of the poor and healed the unclean. In doing so, questions were ignited! A lesson was being taught and though our presence here today, lessons continue to be learnt. We are part of an ongoing lesson and hopefully inspired with an ongoing hunger for learning about what God requires of us – and hopefully an answer that sees us respond in peace, grace, hope and love.

I hope that the Season of Learning will see us ask many questions! Remember my inspirational quote:

“A growing and learning community is not one that has all of the answers, but in fact has some of the questions. To learn is to question, and to question is to learn”.

Questions are really important. I don't want to belong in a place that doesn't ask questions – though I have a sense that there *are* some around. I don't want to be in a place that thinks it has all of the answers – because I don't think such a place exists – though I have a sense that some think they do.

I do want to be in a place where questions are asked and our people grow and learn.

So bring it on!

Bring on the Season of Learning!

The Word

A study by Gareth Darlow

Psalm 22 - Learning through song

Psalms were songs and were often set to music. This psalm seems to begin with instructions to the musicians to set it to a particular tune; “The Deer of the Dawn”.

This is the song Jesus quotes at the time of his death. Research suggests that music and songs often stay with people after other forms of thought and speech are no longer possible. It’s no surprise that as he’s dying, Jesus begins a song that speaks to his predicament.

- Why does Jesus quote this song? What’s in there that makes it meaningful at this point in time?
- Is this a song of hope or of despair? Do hope and despair often go hand in hand? Is it a song of trust, or a song of betrayal?
- Choose a song that means something to you... What gives it meaning? Are the lyrics important? The tune? Do you associate it with a particular time or person in your life?
- What do songs teach us about who we are, and who we want to be?

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch - Learning through Explanation (Acts 8:26-40)

The Ethiopian Orthodox church is one of the oldest in the world. Christianity didn’t become the state religion of Ethiopia until a few hundred years later, but Ethiopians are recorded as being present at Christian gatherings from the time records began being kept. Ethiopians up until this time seem to have been split down the middle between those who worshiped Pagan deities and those who worshiped the Jewish God. It is one of these Jewish worshipers who has come to Jerusalem and now is heading home. Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit finds this man reading Isaiah, and trying to make sense of what he’s reading.

- Have we ever found ourselves staring at a bible passage in increasing consternation, thinking “I know it’s the bible but I have no earthly idea what I’m supposed to take from this...”
- The Ethiopian is a powerful man. As far as the he is concerned, Philip is just some guy on a dusty road. Why does he give Philip his trust?
- Do you remember a time when an idea, some writing, a skill that you hadn’t been able to understand was explained to you, and suddenly became possible? Who was the teacher? What was it about them, and about you in that moment which made everything make sense?

- Understanding leads, in this case, to action. As they go along the road, having come to an understanding of who Jesus is, the Ethiopian says to Philip “Hey, water... Wanna baptise me?”
- What’s something that you have learned that has changed the way you lived?

The Dishonest Manager - Learning through Parable - Luke 16:1-8

Jesus often teaches using parables. The word *parable* comes from a greek word made up of *para-beside* and *bole – throwing*. A parable then is a story which is “thrown beside” the reality that people live in, to comment on that reality.

Jesus tells the story of a rich man who is told that the manager of his estate has been incompetent, and calls for the manager in order to sack him. The manager, before he has to see his boss calls in all the estate’s debtors and halves their debts. The next morning when he presents the accounts, his boss congratulates him for acting shrewdly.

- Luke follows this story up (16:9-13) with three different ‘explanations’ of the parable. It’s about making friends for yourself with what you have... or... it’s about people being faithful in the big things like they are in the little... or... it’s about choosing between God and money. Do you think Luke is 100% sure of what Jesus was trying to say with this story?
- All of Luke’s “explanations” of the story kind of fit. One of the strengths of a story is that it can take on a life of its own, and that people find meaning in it beyond what even the author of the story intended. Why do you think Jesus used stories so much in his teaching?
- Perhaps try to imagine a different ending to the story... “A manager of a medium sized bank is called before the board to present his accounts before being fired; He uses his last day in his position to meet individually with loan holders, and cancel out half of their debt, significantly impacting on the bank’s bottom line for the year. When he comes before the board.....?”
- Why do we think Jesus finishes this story in such an unexpected way? Would the story be as effective if it finished in the way we expected? What’s Jesus trying to say to his listeners?
- When we’re told a set of facts or ideas, we often find ourselves agreeing or disagreeing, understanding or not understanding. A story works differently on our brain. We find ourselves identifying with one character or another. Is there someone we find ourselves identifying with in this story? The manager, the boss, the debtors? What happens if we choose another character and try to identify with them?
- What are the stories that we tell ourselves as a culture; in books, on TV or radio? What do they suggest to us about who we are?

Prayer

I've mentioned previously, that an ignition-point for the entire Seasons process was a recognition that we as a Christian faith community, need to have a greater focus on prayer.

In the context of the Season of Learning, through prayer we are offered a chance to reflect on the places we find ourselves – either individually or as a community – and to learn.

Through prayer we have opportunity to enter into dialogue with God who exists at the core of our faith – and to learn.

Through prayer we create a period of 'time-out', an opportunity to stop, look and listen. A chance to think and consider, dream and contemplate – and to learn.

Through prayer we are challenged to hope and dream – to discern what our place and our calling is – and to learn.

Through prayer we have an opportunity to share and to learn.

As a group or as an individual you are encouraged to pray. You may wish to use this as a prompt:

Loving God

You are at the heart of our faith. You are the teacher of all, the inspirer of all and the companion of all. We pray for learning and enlightenment as we discern your will in our lives.

Open our eyes to see and respond to your will. Let us learn through our experiences. Let us hear those things that will enable us to grow in love and service. Encourage us with time and energy to reflect on your lessons, learning as we move in the journey.

Loving God, in this season of learning, let our mouths, ears and minds be opened in discussion. Let us learn with open minds taking comfort in what we understand and anticipation in what we don't. Let our imaginations be fired. Let us dream and create in your name and in response to your teachings.

Let our learnings inspire action. Action that reflects your love and intentions for service in your name.

Loving God – you are at the heart of our faith. Be with us as we journey. Let this be a time of loving, of growing and of learning.

This we pray in the name of Christ.

Amen

The miracle of silent prayer

Consider silent prayer and meditation. As a group or individual, don't be afraid to allow groups periods of silence during which those who are present can allow themselves to focus on whatever they feel is important.

Outreach

We are hopeful that you and your group will decide on some sort of outreach activity (or activities) as part of the Season of Learning. Through outreach we all have an opportunity to learn much about our community, our place in that community and our calling when we respond in the name of Christ.

The choice of outreach activity and the extent to which your group engages this, is wholly the decision of you and/or your group. It may be as big or as small as you decide.

It is hoped that your group will embrace the outreach part of this process as it presents possibilities for very real positive change for others and as such, represents a critical part of ministry in the name of Christ.

Recognize that in outreach, we are dealing with other people – some we know, some we don't. Ensure that actions we do for other people either directly or indirectly, are done with their *permission*. If dealing with a person or an organization, obtain permission first. Always respect other people's privacy and right to confidentiality.

Create

You are invited to contribute to the season's topic creatively. This could mean music, artwork, craftwork, poetry, drama etc. How do you respond to the theme of 'learning' creatively? Its exciting here to consider the possibilities for creative response, and once again, groups or individuals are invited to engage in this part of the process in whatever way they feel comfortable.

Celebrate

At the conclusion of the Season and our focus on learning, it would be great for your group to celebrate the journey and any outcomes that have been experienced. Celebration can take whatever form your group wishes it to. It may extend simply to a quiet prayer of thanks, through to a presentation or celebration in worship.

Towards the end of the 'Autumn season', the Leadership Group will be in touch to see how you might wish to celebrate.

Finally.....

We encourage your group to embrace the possibilities of *Seasons*. If you require further information or assistance, please get in touch with one of the Leaders.

Finally, we give thanks to God for the talents and energies of our people.

Coatesville Leadership Group