

Evangelists as Teaching Learners
KNOW THYSELF! Be A Learner!
Fundamentally We Teach Who We Are!

By Everett Graffeo

Evangelists are to be Teaching Learners, exemplifying a life of faith that is learner-driven. As learners, evangelists are followers of Jesus. Learners walk and talk with Jesus, traveling the road with him as disciples. We are challenged by the guiding principle that we are life-time learners. We are student-workers for life in a world that becomes our laboratory of learning, where every person, every experience, every insight increases our understanding.

Our value as teachers emerges from the knowledge we gain as students. Being the teacher or mentor is the companion to being a lifetime learner. A significant ministry of blessing for the evangelist as Teaching Learner is to create in the midst of the community an environment where learning is held as having the highest priority. As teacher we are only gateways to knowledge, hoping to open minds and hearts to new vistas and yet-unexplored horizons, to beckon and challenge persons to journey in faith in being disciples of Jesus even as we are his disciples. This is where Teaching Learner and Apostolic Witness merge as one. This is where sacramental blessing joins recipient and evangelist.

Questions for Discussion: Who has been a blessing in your life? Who has made a difference in your experience of living? What made him or her great? Who were your teachers, your mentors? Who nurtured your curiosity? What kind of student were you? What truth was awakened in you during your encounter with your mentors that even now you can recall the impact they had on your life? What was there about you as a student that made great mentoring possible? What made you the right student because mentoring is mutuality in learning?

I am grateful for those who mentored me. After thinking through those who have been my mentors, I discovered that they had many things in common. They were all older than I was; all no longer are with us on earth except one who continues to sustain me in my ministry; all were evangelists, except one; they shared their lives with me in their homes and in our travels and ministry together. They opened their minds and hearts to me, giving full voice to the gift of their thoughts and experiences. They helped me to trust

the calling of my soul in that period of my life. I see now that I was blessed by them that I in turn might be a blessing to others.

I consider these to be sacred relationships, spirit-led and grace-embodied. I am thankful I was allowed to be a disciple at their feet, an apprentice in their workshop of life. As I remembered their names and effect upon my life, I was more fully aware of *the slow pace of my own self-emergence as a person*. I was surprised by the fact that *these mentors appeared at every crucial stage of my life*. It was unexpected; I had not anticipated that insight. At every point along the way when my identity needed to adjust and grow—in college, in graduate school, in a new culture, in new roles, and in my continued search for identity—a mentor was there to help me in my search and to open my life to new possibilities.

I also was surprised by the fact that *no specific mentors came to mind for several years in my mid-life*. Did I not need mentors? What was I doing in those years? I came to the realization that these were some of my most fruitful years of teaching when I was the mentor. It was my turn to be the teacher; to offer to younger people the gift that had been given to me by my mentors in my younger years.

I remained a student of learning but shared that learning in teaching ways. It is the partnership of teacher-learner that is the spiraling dance of life. *Evangelists who are mentors are first of all learners and remain learners in their mentoring role*.

I am grateful that as a young immature college student I came into the circle of influence of *Roy Cheville*. I never saw myself wanting to or trying to imitate him in his presentation of self, but I was challenged by his personal strength of character, his spirit of exploration, his commitment to the education process, and his faithfulness to the calling of Christ.

I am grateful for *Reynold Carlson*, Indiana University professor who took an untested, graduate student into his confidence and sphere of influence, calling forth gifts and potential that previously had not been tapped. He opened for me a whole new world of nature and human relationships.

I am grateful for *Denis Pioi*, who came to our home in Papeete three times a week for over a year to teach us the Tahitian language. We shared in ministry as traveling companions for many years until he was unable to travel any longer. The patience he demonstrated with us in learning the language; the wisdom he shared with me in the application of the gospel in a

culture other than my own was invaluable, not only for French Polynesia but as a foundation to all of the other languages and cultures I encountered in subsequent years.

I am grateful for *Franklyn Steiner* of Mobile, Alabama. I was a new apostle assigned to the South. Franklyn became my mentor from our first meeting to well after my assignment change eight years later. He was a spiritual companion who bridged the Mason-Dixon Line separation between a Northern boy and the Southern people. He was a wise counselor, traveling companion, and personal friend.

I am grateful for *Paul Booth* who grew into the role of mentor through his writings. Through them, he became my teacher in discovering the fundamental nature of the ministry of blessing. Later he mentored me personally through personal association and encounters in his Independence office. He was a beloved friend; always available to listen to my questions and one with whom I safely could test new ideas. I valued his measured and thoughtful response and trusted his judgment. He always sent me on my way with renewed enthusiasm and encouragement to continue the unfolding of the beauty of the ministry of evangelists as ministers of blessing.

I am grateful for *Velma Ruch* and her unmeasured support and encouragement in the defining and designing tasks of the office and ministry of the evangelist and the exploration and development of the essential nature of the Order of Evangelist. Her sustaining presence in my life and ministry has been a joy, exemplifying the best in modeling the Teaching Learner experience. In my life, she moved from classroom teacher, to critic, to supporter, to associate in exploration, to personal friend, and confidant. These are several tasks of a mentor.

Being a Teaching Learner has to do with having the courage to keep our hearts, minds, and spirit open to new possibilities that learning and living require in a changing world. As a learner, I always am discovering more about myself and who I am. It is a lifelong process of *self-discovery*. *Know thyself is the admonition of wisdom*. The self-identity question remains a primary issue in my life as a retired person and an active evangelist. It is the call to continue a life of learning and integrating new understandings into our living and our ministering.

Being a Teaching Learner also carries a second major issue: integrity. *Am I who I say I am? Is there an application of my learning expressed in my life that is congruent with what I say and do?* While serving as Graceland's

chaplain, I talked several times with a female student who asked me the most life-examining question anyone ever had asked me up to that time. It remains a pressing question. “Are you real?” After a long reflective pause, I answered the only way I could think of, “I hope I am.” Integrity is a daily exercise in vulnerability where the inner truth of our lives and our outer performance are congruent. People recognize insincerity and superficial involvement in another.

Learning involves us in the task of experimentation. How will I be a blessing in this situation? The last six years of my appointee ministry were the most experimental, most challenging, most satisfying, and most productive of my life. Chevillie, in mentoring, had created long before in me the image of Zion as *a laboratory of learning*. That affected my life throughout my ministry and culminated as an image of ministry when I became presiding evangelist.

The image of Teaching Learner is a direct result of the idea and attitude of one who lives and moves in the world and sees it as a laboratory of learning. Spiritual giants like Gandhi called his life *experiments with truth*. I think members of the Order of Evangelists sense that we are a living “experiment of truth.” We continue to experiment under the tutorship of the Spirit; asking basic, fundamental questions concerning our ministry as Ministers of Blessing.

As I review the changes that have taken place in the Order of Evangelists in the last decade and a half, we have been maybe more than anything else, *learners*. As laboratory apprentices, we were able to put into practice the results of our experimentation. We needed to be true to that which we were learning. We felt the call to live with integrity the results of our experimentation.

Our integrity to the calling to bless moved us from the past to a future that was not only for individuals but included families, congregations, the order, Community of Christ, member and non-member, young and old. We became blessing ministers in the midst of God’s world. The results of our learning were satisfying, renewing, challenging, and joy-filled. The new connections we experienced as ministers of blessing fulfilled the best hopes in our lives. We were not distracted by other happenings going on around us.

We learned the truth of Martin Buber’s statement, “All real living is meeting.” The essence of blessing is the endless meeting of others as Spiritual Companion, as Apostolic Witness, as Pastoral Presence, as Living Sanctuary, and as Teaching Learner. Blessing always involves us in meeting,

in encountering, in connecting with other persons. As our lives have been touched by the Spirit's tutorship, we feel blessed. As we live out our understanding of blessing, our words and deeds have an integrity that allows us to teach and mentor others. Integrity demands of us an openness that reveals who we are; vulnerable human beings, who continue to be students, learners, apprentices, and disciples of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Closing

As followers of Jesus, we journey with him on the paths and over the waters where he travels. We go with him into arenas where we learn as we live in the laboratory of life and learn what it means to bless as he blesses, to listen as he listens, to touch lives as he touches lives, to mentor those that come into our circle of influence as others have been there for us, and to connect with them at critical junctures in their lives. This is the blessing of the Teaching Learner.

The Significance of the Order of Evangelists

The Order of Evangelists is an integrated community of persons with a rich diversity of talents, gifts, interests, and experience who by calling and ordination freely choose to come under the disciplines of the order for the benefit of the church and world.

The following elements form the flesh and spirit of this invisible community of servant ministers of the order:

- We hold a common office with a common ordination as priesthood;
- We have a common vision and mission statement for our guidance;
- We have common images of who we are as ministers of blessing;
- We live under common spiritual disciplines as a community of faith;
- We have common goals by which to focus our ministry in the geographical and social arenas in which we minister;
- We have a common and growing base of informative literature and resources;
- We have common procedures to maintain a harmonious communion of blessing ministers;
- We have a common communication network among members of the order.