

# **Lifelong Learning and Ministry**

Deacon Josephine Borgeson

Deacon John Willets

## **Foreword**

*Our focus and audience*

The action of the General Convention of 2003 on continuing education for the church's ministers gave us pause. The concept is great, but it is in the nature of canons to suggest controls, not serve as motivators. We want to use our experience in adult learning in the academy and in the church to raise some questions and suggest some directions for encouraging continuous learning in ministry. We are particularly concerned to offer some things to think about for deacons and those who minister with them when planning and resourcing lifelong learning.

Josephine Borgeson

John W. Willets

## **What motivates adult learners**

*Personal observations [JB]...*

In the early nineties I worked for the diocese of Los Angeles as Missioner for Christian Education. One of my initiatives was to offer intercultural training for bible study leaders. The rector of my home parish was also someone who valued small group study, so we tried again and again to recruit and train small group bible study leaders from the congregation, but found no takers. A few years later we found ourselves moving toward a model of Total Ministry for the congregation. We called a team to share with us in developing the ministry of all the members. After a little work on team building, we launched into a study of scripture, which all agreed was foundational. We included an exploration of how Episcopalians understand the authority of scripture, a survey of biblical history, and practice in bible study. Within six months we had a team of people all capable of leading small group bible study as a part of our forums for the whole congregation. Again and again I have seen this happen.

Ministry education must be functional and pragmatic. When an individual or a group accepts responsibility for ministry, in church or in daily life, both the desire to learn and the ease in doing it increase dramatically. Decades of work in ministry development have taught me that when people own a call to ministry, they are motivated to learn. This motivation may be awakened by a call to a particular office or role, by preparing for a new responsibility or situation in ministry, or by needing to catch up with skills and concepts necessary for a ministry that is thrust upon one by circumstances.

It is important, though, to distinguish between ministry education that is imposed by an external authority as a requirement for ordination, licensing or employment, as opposed to goals for learning in ministry that are formed by individuals in response to personal or community felt needs. Learning that is done to satisfy a requirement of which the learner is not convinced, and for which the learner sees no application, is just jumping through the hoops; more about this below.

*Some examples from the daily lives of adult learners [JB]...*

Another way to identify what motivates us to learn is to look at the learning projects we pursue as part of ordering our personal lives, managing our households, or practicing our hobbies. We know, from a classic Canadian study done in the early 70s that all adults, regardless of level or type of educational background, pursue individual learning projects. (See Scott, et al. & OISE, web sources) Sometimes these projects are pursued out of passion for a subject or for pleasure, but most often they are pursued because it is something one needs to learn to do or because it is something that needs to be done.

- The refrigerator dies and you want to purchase a new one that is the most energy efficient at the best cost and you need it now.
- You have a little cardiac episode—just a scare, really—and it is apparent that you can no longer put off the lifestyle changes you need to make.
- The guest bedroom needs to be turned into a home for grandmother, but the budget is minuscule and the decorating shows on television are entertaining, but no help at all.
- A member of the newcomers' group in your congregation asks some difficult questions about the Trinity which old formulae don't satisfy, and you realize that you need to explore what theologians are saying these days about it.
- You need to learn to use instant messaging and the vocabulary to go with it if you are to keep up with your pre-teen grandchild.

All of these learning projects are responses to felt needs that involve acquiring information, and in most instances developing new skills and integrating new concepts as well. Most people do not do consumer research on the off chance that they might need something new, learn new habits because of general pronouncements that it would be good for them, make changes in their households until their lives change, explore concepts for the sheer joy of it, or acquire new communication skills unless there is someone out there with whom to communicate.

All of this is to underscore that most learning for adults is driven by usefulness in real life. It probably is important, though, to talk about that minority of learners engaged in learning projects who are motivated by pleasure rather than need. Such learning may be about golf, international cuisines, bird watching, family genealogy, baseball statistics, knitting techniques, biblical archaeology or other passions. Still, this learning is usually for application, to master a skill, give something to others, enrich a conversation. Whether out of a need to respond to circumstances, or out of the pursuit of pleasure, it is about what we will do with what we learn. In effective ministry education we will consider our strongest gifts and what we love to do, and the needs of the communities in which our ministries are set, when setting learning goals.

*Some questions about such a pragmatic approach to learning [JB]...*

Some folks will be quick to assert that ministry education focused on functioning plays into our society's over-emphasis on doing rather than being. We know that we reward high-functioning people, busy people. When introduced to others we ask, "And what do you do?" Identity seems defined by tasks, not relationships as it is in many other cultures. We are all too busy. Ask

anyone, of any economic class or age group, what they do not have enough of, and they will tell you time. A recent ad campaign for the automated services of a bank in California opined that “Time is money” undervalues time. A parish priest had the honesty to admit in a recent sermon that when she is feeling stuck and dull in her prayer life, she turns to detailed administrative church work, like formatting the newsletter or updating the calendar and ministry rotas, rather than just sitting with her prayers. Many of us alternately complain about having too much to do, and use our busyness as an exercise in self-justification. Most of us are poor in play time and fallow time—genuinely free time—and most of us undervalue the way such time contributes to lifelong learning without our consciously trying to make it do so.

Perhaps if we could focus lifelong ministry education in response to felt needs and applicability, rather than spending too much time on things “they” say we need to know, but for which we see no purpose, we could free more time for the insights that come from play and sabbath time, and for the prayerful integrative reflection that makes a whole cloth of our learning.

### **Turning to the literature**

#### *The 30 things we know for sure about adult learning*

In an article easily found on the internet, we can see that others come to similar conclusions. (Zemke & Zemke, 1984) For example, the first six of the thirty things the authors list relate to the assumptions drawn from our own experience. Let us take a look at them.

1. Adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-changing events—e.g., marriage, divorce, a new job, a promotion, being fired, retiring, losing a loved one, moving to a new city. [All of these have an impact on our lives of faith, but so do baptism, confirmation, reaffirmation of our baptismal vows, strong renewal or healing experiences, ordination, or any time we experience a renewed sense of Christian vocation.]
2. The more life-change events an adult encounters, the more likely he or she is to seek out learning opportunities. Just as stress increases as life-change events accumulate, the motivation to cope with change through engagement in a learning experience increases. [Sometimes the greatest stresses in our lives of faith come when the Gospel calls into question some aspect of our lives or some convention of our culture. Changes in one’s church life can also be unsettling when they come at the same time as crises in our world.]
3. The learning experiences adults seek out on their own are directly related—at least in their perception—to the life-change events that triggered the seeking. [Sometimes we begin with learning in response to an external change, such as something in the news, or an action of a church convention, only to be led into deeper levels of learning.]
4. Adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after, or even during the actual life change event. Once convinced that the change is a certainty, adults will engage in any learning that promises to help them cope with the transition. [Sometimes life these days seems to be just one constant transition. People may look to their faith community for certainty and stability, and not realize that it, too, participates in the rapid pace of change. Learning related to our

faith may require a continual reengagement of the Gospel, rethinking our faith so that it continues to sustain us in changing times, rather than becoming fossilized.]

5. Adults who are motivated to seek out a learning experience do so primarily because they have a use for the knowledge or skill being sought. Learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself. [Most adult learning in our congregations is ministry motivated. When people own some aspect of the church's ministry, or understand and are committed to the exercise of ministry in daily life, their need for greater understanding and skill in fulfilling ministry responsibilities is what drives their learning.]
6. Increasing or maintaining one's sense of self-esteem and pleasure are strong secondary motivators for engaging in learning experiences. [There are two facets to this in church life. One is the need to do things well, especially ministries that have a public face, such as roles in worship leadership. The other is what we feel passionate about in ways that give us pleasure and bring meaning. Faith in relationship to the visual arts, music, writing, textile arts, cooking, flower arranging and gardening, etc. would be good examples of the second.]

### **Observations**

*Experience regarding adult learning styles [JW]...*

I spent most of my life as a teacher. After some experience, I discovered that I needed to focus on learning rather than teaching. I also discovered that learning, at least for adults who had accumulated a fair amount of experience in their lives, needs to have a context, a place to apply learning or they would not engage with me in the learning process.

*Two different approaches to learning...*

Let me give a general example. We go to Target and buy something, bring it home in a box, and inevitably open up the box to discover it has to be assembled. Most things that are larger than a couple of square feet come in pieces. I noticed that when I buy something requiring assembly, I open the box, do a quick check to find the allen wrench and bolts or screws and immediately begin to put the thing together. Often I end with a few extra bolts or screws and think to myself, "Now wasn't that nice that they put in a few extras!" It never occurs to me that these *extra* pieces were really needed, because the thing I assembled seems fine.

On the other hand, I have a good friend who goes a little nuts when he sees me do this. When he puts something together, he puts on the coffee pot, opens the box while it brews, finds the directions, pours a cup of coffee, sits down in a comfortable chair, reads through the directions, lays out the bolts/screws in order with those that are 1/2", those that are 3/4", those that are 1", etc. Then he sorts things into piles with piece A, piece B, and so on, lying in order. Only then does he begin to put the thing together.

Why, I wonder, do we approach this same learning task differently? I think of this as a learning task because we learn to assemble the thing we bought. We did not know how to do it before we began even though we already had some basic skills, like knowing what an allen wrench is and how to use it. What I began to discover as I thought more and more about these differences

between us was that people approach learning in different ways. Some seem to require a hands on process, some seem to need a conceptual map, some need to work with others, some prefer to work by themselves, some need to begin with theories and then work towards applying them, others need to begin with application and then find the theory which enables them to generalize from their experience.

*An introduction to Kolb's Cycle for experiential learning...*

Now let us consider a learning model or theory that gives us theoretical underpinnings for what we observed. As one of the faculty at DePaul University's School for New Learning (SNL). This is a college devoted to adult learners. At SNL we built a program on a theoretical learning model that allows us to think about learning connected to experience. We value experience as evidence of knowledge and we developed a way to assess experience as evidence of competency. As we reflected on a theory of learning that met our needs, we thought through a process with David Kolb, who published the work as Kolb's theory of experiential learning. (Kolb, 1984) Now I want to turn to that model in order to explain or show how the differences in approaching learning described above fit into a theory of learning. (Figure 1.)

It is clear that in our experiences are the beginnings of how we see the world and make sense of it. Most of us are experiential learners. We describe this in a number of ways. Sometimes we talk about learning by doing. Sometimes we talk about learning from our mistakes. Sometimes we talk about learning by applying our strengths, things we do very well and have served us well over time. In any event, when we talk about our experience, we have a beginning point. Kolb's model may begin with Concrete Experience (CE).

*Moving from Concrete Experience to Reflective Observation...*

When we begin with an experience, we have to think about what happened during that experience. If I use a model of prison ministry to women in Cook County Jail, what constitutes my engagement with these women, what do we do when I visit, what are the stories they tell me, what services can I provide them or to which resources I can connect them, what do we talk about, think about, cry about, rejoice about, and so on... As I think about these things, I can assemble these reflections into a story both by myself and with the women whom I serve. I can reflect on the story by myself or I can tell the story to others who may be faced with the same or similar tasks, or I can tell the story when I want to influence others by the events I experienced. Kolb calls this Reflective Observation (RO). Two stages in the learning process we encountered so far are concrete experience followed by reflective observation. The movement is CE to RO. (Again, refer to the diagram.)

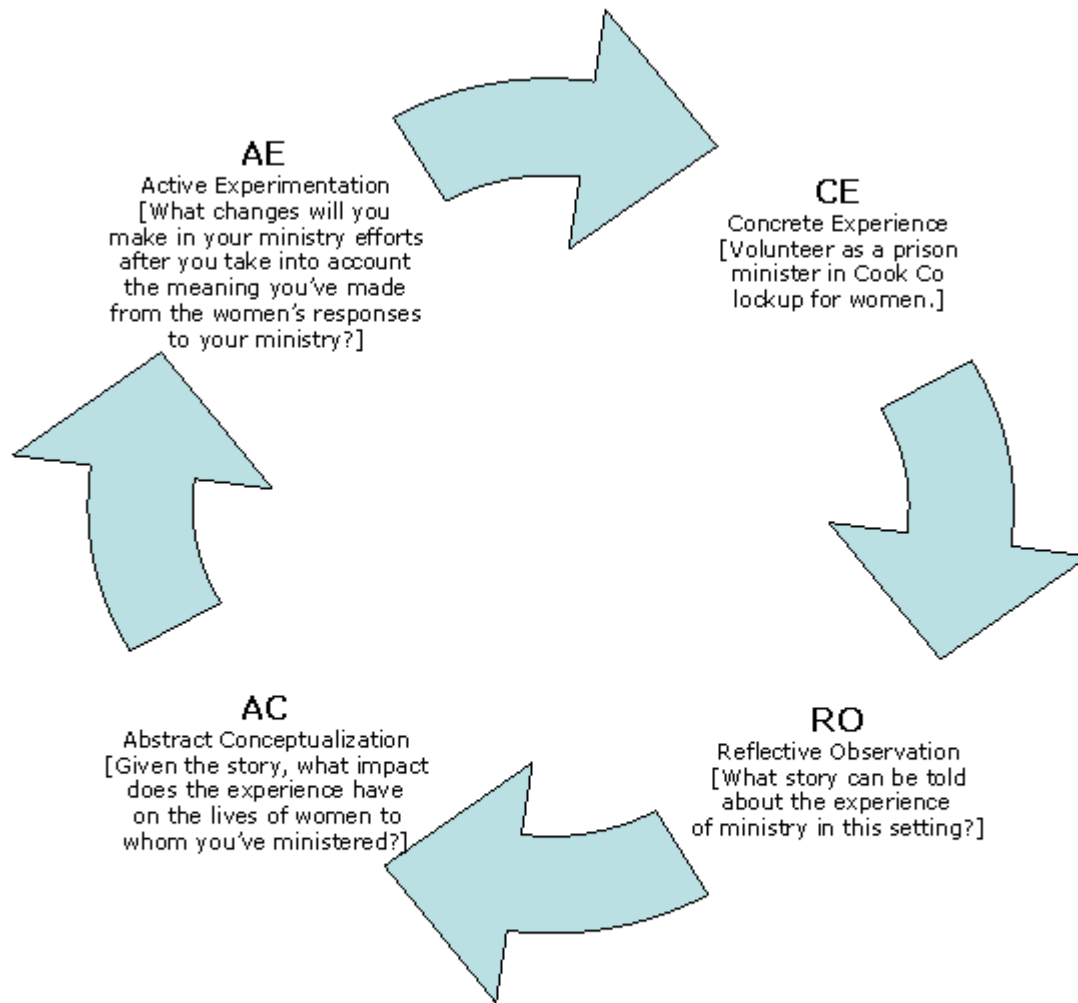
What assists the process of reflection? What makes the reflection process as good as it could be? And on its heels, what are the skills of reflection? While I will not go into these for the purpose of this paper, let me simply acknowledge that these are skills and they are closely associated with the skills required for story-telling. Those who can tell a good story about the past can teach us a lot about reflective observation. Where story-telling is embedded within the culture there is a propensity for good reflective skills. In this quick insight, we can see that there are cultural dimensions to learning as well.

*Moving from Reflective Observation to Abstract Conceptualization...*

If I am able to tell a good story about an experience it leads me naturally to making meaning from the story. I have a friend to whom I often tell an experiential story, and her response to me is almost always, so what? One of the things folks seem to be saying a lot lately is “and your point was?” Sometimes this remark connotes impatience, but other times it is wonderfully focusing. For Kolb, the so-what question is the pregnant question of meaning. In fact, it is in this question that the real learning occurs. What difference to the lives of these women has my ministry made? Is suffering relieved? Are resources available? Can I do what I do better? What could I do in order to do my work better? And so on... Kolb refers to this process as Abstract Conceptualization (AC).

The so-what question can be superficial or it can be deep and textured. It can be simply about my own experience, or it can make connections to the experiences of others. The richer and more textured the process of making meaning from the experience, of answering the so-what question, the more, the better, the richer, the outcome and the more meaningful and generalizable becomes the reflection. I also discovered that exploring this meaning with others usually produces a richer and more meaningful response to so-what than if I do the meaning-making by myself. Here then is another aspect of learning, one that demonstrates that collaboration through dialogue leads to richer meaning than simple personal reflection.

Notice that it is in the so-what question of meaning-making that leads to the list of learnings that are connected to continuing education. If we want to be in charge of our own learning, then here is the source of what the learning needs are. Connected to any story (R0) are the pointers to personal development. Moving from the story to meaning (AC) involves a personal assessment constructed around improvement, i.e., what do I need to learn that would make this experience better, richer, deeper, and ultimately more meaningful. In this way, lifelong learners continually renew their motivation and direct their own development.



**Kolb Cycle of Experiential Learning**  
**An example from prison ministry.**

*Moving from Abstract Conceptualization to Active Experimentation...*

Finally, once we make meaning from our experiences, we have the possibility and opportunity to apply that knowledge to new experiences. In fact, I need to go out and test what I think I learned. What can I do now in my ministry I have not done before that can lead to a better experience for those who are locked up? Can I influence others with my knowledge so I can expand the resources available to these women? Notice that the key of this fourth, and last, stage of Kolb's theory is experimentation. Kolb calls this stage Active Experimentation (AE). Once the experiment is concluded, I have created a new experience and now the whole cycle begins again. (Refer to diagram once more for the whole cycle of experiential learning.)

Let me recap the process. Concrete Experience is a beginning point for knowledge. Remember, we are talking about experiential learning or experiential knowledge. I will say more about this later. Reflection on the experience reveals and assembles the facts of the experience. Abstracting the facts yields meaning and meaning affords the opportunity to experiment anew. CE leads to RO that leads in turn to AC that culminates in AE that result in what Kolb calls the Cycle of Experiential Learning. Making meaning from experience is an application of this model and the more we are attuned to the process, the more we understand the skills of each step, the more we formulate a worldview that is richer, more textured, more meaningful, more satisfying.

*Why is it important to apply learning?...*

I promised to return to the notion of experiential learning. There are other ways to learn. However, most adults learn experientially and their worldviews are formed by their experiences. It should be noted though that knowledge acquired from any source, experience, lectures, reading, etc., when put into practice leads to experience. In his book, *Religious education encounters liberation theology*, Daniel Schipani (1988) says that the best idea we learn that is not put into practice is armchair revolution. What this says to me is that what I learn if left unapplied, is nice to know, but it does not have an effect on my life nor on the lives of others. Transformation occurs from applying what we know to create life experiences and then, reflecting on these experiences, to make meaning. Experiential learning is one source of our understanding of how the world works, perhaps the most important source. We all have a varied repertoire of experiences and we all make various levels of meaning from them. This makes us complex as persons. Making meaning from our experiences is important or unimportant depending on how rich and textured our experiences are. Some of our experiences are rich and meaningful, some are simple and superficial. The good news is we can make our lives richer when we spend time intentionally developing the skills that make meaning of experience. Then we apply what we know to new situations and the process deepens our complexity over time.

Kolb's cycle of learning offers us one way to begin to think about learning from experience both as individuals and as groups. Our understanding of our personal and collective experiences is more than simple opinion because it is grounded in the collective wisdom of living in community.

### **Challenge to apply the learning cycle to ministry**

How does this learning make a difference to my own diaconal ministry and how can this help others make meaning from their ministries, deacons or otherwise? The process of experiential learning is applied to all aspects of our lives. As a deacon, I ground my reflection on my ministry within the contexts of the baptismal covenant and the promises we make at our ordinations. Let me give two examples, one from the baptismal covenant and one from the ordinal.

*A Baptismal Promise becomes an assessment for learning...*

If I promise that I will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Then I need to reflect on what skills and resources I need to fulfill this promise. I have to have the skills of proclamation which include critical skills of reading, analyzing, synthesizing, inferring, and

applying ideas and concepts to my life and the world in which I live, as well as the speaking skills the promise implies. I need knowledge skills of the Good News, what is in the bible and what are the examples from the life of Christ that help me to understand my own behavior and the behaviors that I see in the society and communities in which I live. I understand that even though I took a good course about the New Testament in seminary or in school, this is not a substitute for ongoing bible study that is both personal and in community. Even if I learned methods of theological reflection in a class or through EFM, I need to continue to develop these skills because competency is developmental and I should be getting better and better at it. I need to learn to apply the skills of bible study, constantly connecting what I learn to the experiences of my life and reflecting on them, making meaning from them, and reapplying what I learn in new ways (CE→RO→AC→AE→CE...).

*An Ordinal Promise becomes an assessment for learning ...*

If I promise to assist the bishop and priests in public worship and in the ministration of God's Word and Sacraments, then I need to constantly work with the bishops and priests with whom I serve, coming to the table each time in a new spirit, forming and reforming the symbols and liturgy to be more and more connected to the lives of the people with whom we live, work and serve so that all our lives are made richer and all are equipped to see the connections between the liturgy and the sacredness of the work we do outside of worship. I need to understand my role as deacon making it clear to all so we can see and know the differences between what deacons do and what the bishops and priests do and even more importantly connect what we all do to the contexts of our lives so we are prepared as members of Christ's body to function in ways that are diaconal, priestly, and apostolic everyday, lifting and rejoicing in the sacredness the work we do daily. I need to make clear the connections between what I am called and ordained to do for the sake of the community so that the community benefits from that calling.

My job for self-reflection and my assessment of what I have learned and what I need to learn is to apply the Kolb model to all of the promises I made in the covenant and in the ordinal, so I can better fulfill my promises, both as a member of the baptized and as an ordained person. It requires me to be intentional to make meaning from my life. It requires that I attend to the process all of my life, developing plans for learning and experiments for trying. While it is a simple model, it is powerful and assists me to design learning needs, assess my life personally and in community, and experiment with a newness that helps to continually fulfill my promises. It requires constant attention to work and meaning, acting and assessing, being equipped and equipping. It requires community and dialogue, trust and caring concern, good communication skills, and truth-telling. It requires that we truly develop an approach to community that reflects the Body of Christ as Paul notes in his first letter to the church in Corinth. [1 Cor 12:12-31].

**Resourcing our goals [JB]...**

Developing our learning goals based on our experiences, gifts, passions, and values is key. But we also need the resources to pursue our goals. Here are some observations and suggestions about support for lifelong learning in church systems.

When I talk with groups of deacons about continuing education, the conversation almost always turns toward how we can get a piece of the paid parochial presbyters' pie. Folks grumble about the fact that programs and funding are geared toward those who are employed by the church. Even if events were scheduled when and where deacons with day jobs could attend, subsidies may be restricted. We compare ourselves to priests, and find that we are valued less.

I wonder why are we fighting for a bite of the pie that is conventional professional ministerial continuing education, and not working to bake a bigger pie, one that is enough to go around for all who seek continuing learning in ministry? As deacons with a heart for those who are being left out or left behind, why are we not exploring creative use of time, dollars and other resources, so that all of the church's ministers, that is, all of the baptized, have opportunities for learning and growing?

If I were going into a diocese to consult on strengthening their support and encouragement for lifelong learning, the following are some questions I would ask.

We know that in any diocese there are some good things going on. Some congregations will be working to support all their ministers, and encourage their continuing learning. Some commissions and committees will be offering innovative programming that responds to learners' real needs and passions, and fits their schedules and pocket books. When we uncover what the good things are, we can replicate them, build on them, learn from them. We can use the constructive things that are happening to leverage improvements where structures and programs are not serving the needs of learners.

### ***Oversight***

- Does the Commission on Ministry have a subcommittee working on encouraging lifelong learning?
- Does the Commission on Ministry or the education committee of the diocese offer help in developing goals for lifelong learning? If I wanted help in developing a learning plan, to whom would I turn?
- Does the diocese have a policy encouraging congregations to support the continuing learning of all its baptismal ministers, or, at the least, all its ministerial leaders?
- Does the diocese have a sabbatical policy? Does it include a plan to fund related expenses for small congregations and extra-congregational ministries with modest budgets? To whom does the policy apply?
- Do the Bishop and his/her staff model lifelong learning for the diocese? To whom do they give an account of their continuing learning in ministry?

***Funding***

- Does the diocese have matching funds for continuing education courses and projects?
- To whom are these funds available?
- Are funds available for a broad range of learning projects which will enhance ministry? programs offered at a variety of institutions? independent learning projects? classes in non-traditional formats (such as on-line), etc.?
- Where is the information about when and how to apply for funds available? How is it publicized?
- What funds are available? If demand exceeds resources, what are the plans for increasing the funding base?

***Programs***

- How many of the programs within and funded by the diocese are offered at times when those not employed by the church can attend?
- How is input sought when choosing conference topics, and when spending diocesan money on speakers and trainers? How broad is the base for assessing interest?
- Does someone in the diocesan office maintain a resource center (either physical or virtual) or continuing education opportunities? How is it accessed? publicized?
- Are electronic means of communication used to support learning among peer groups or mentoring relationships which because of distance or complex schedules can only meet occasionally?
- How are low-cost learning groups, book clubs, mentoring and peer reflection groups encouraged by the diocese?
- Do diocesan communication vehicles publicize lifelong learning opportunities and stories of extraordinary efforts by groups and individuals?
- In what other creative ways is lifelong learning in ministry modeled, supported, and encouraged?

**Conclusion and Invitation**

Both of us cannot say enough about shopping as the American way of life. We hate the consumer approach to practically everything. And we hope our reflections here will help deacons and those who minister with them avoid the pitfall of simply shopping for courses to satisfy a requirement.

We want to encourage lifelong learning that builds on experience, makes powerful connections, and leads into creative justice seeking.

We welcome dialogue. Please let us know when our ideas have resonated with your experience, what you find puzzling or challenging in what we have written, and where you have applied our ideas.

Deacon Josephine Borgeson  
Santa Rosa, California  
[jborgeson@att.net](mailto:jborgeson@att.net)

Deacon John Willets  
Jacksonville, Illinois  
[jwillets@condor.depaul.edu](mailto:jwillets@condor.depaul.edu)

©Copyright 2005. Permission is granted to reproduce or link this document for personal, educational, and research use. Permission is required for all other reproduction including electronic republication or print duplication outside of fair use.

### ***Sources Cited:***

Canadian Studies in Adult Lifelong Learning are informed by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE): <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/>

Kolb, D. A., *The experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1984.

Schipani, Daniel S, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988.

Scott, Sue, Bruce Spencer, & Alan Thomas. *Learning for Life: Canadian Readings in Adult Education*. <http://www.thompsonbooks.com/55077085.html> University of Alberta, Athabasca University, and OISE, Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.  
<http://www.thompsonbooks.com/55077085.html>

Zemke & Zemke, *Innovation Abstracts*, Vol VI, No 8, March 9, 1984, found at:  
<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-3.htm>