Leadership Guides No. 6

How Do People Learn?

[The following items are compiled from various sources]

How do people learn?

How best do people learn? This has a high degree of relevance for effective Christian communication of the Gospel. Until relatively recently, all teaching strategies were developed for children. But now, considerable research has been done on the best ways to teach adults effectively. Indeed it is a subject that can itself be studied at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

Adults learn best when:

- they feel in control and have choices in the direction of the learning process

- *at least some of the learning process is within a small interactive group.* (A combination of regular 'small church' activity coupled with regular combined groups – *e.g.* the Festivals)

- they are given a high level of respect for their current viewpoints and status

- there is no condescension by the teacher

- the teaching builds on their previous experience

- there is 'transferability' - they can apply the teaching immediately to real situations in their own lives

- teachers realize that most people have a surprisingly short attention span. The hour-long lecture is not, in general, a good means of communication. After about 10 minutes of continuous input, people cease to absorb much new information

- there is a mixture of teaching approaches, including considerable interactivity: role-play or drama, discussion groups, questionnaires or other feedback. Visual aids are used - *e.g.* video-clips, OHP graphics

- learners are given the space to come to their own conclusions based on evidence offered to them, in a non-pressured way

- the successful learning environment is friendly, informal, and often humorous

- they have the option to ask questions without fear of embarrassment or condemnation

- they have a good trusting relationship with the teacher who should be sending them a good 'para-message'. In other words, learners are looking to see if the teacher's own life reflects the content and usefulness of the teaching: *does he or she 'walk the talk'?*

- the teaching has a specific, practical, assessable goal, rather than being vague, abstract, or aiming at a range of targets

- they have a good relationship with the other learners

- activate the three principles: **I**mpression, **R**epetition, **A**ssociation

Teaching is far less effective when some or all of these elements are absent. No doubt the clever motivated learners will still obtain some benefit, but many others will be unable to learn much.

We see here many elements of communication which are clearly demonstrated in the Bible, and also reflect Biblical principles of behaviour and respect, inter-personal relationships, and an outworking of the worth of the individual. Indeed, we see them demonstrated clearly in the ministry of Jesus.

Application to evangelism and discipleship
Evangelistic approaches which have the following characteristics are counter-productive:

- are abstract, not relating to people's day-to-day lives and needs

- assume previous knowledge that learners do not have

- are preachy, one-way, heavy, lengthy

- give no opportunity for discussion, interaction or feedback

- lack humour

- are condescending, critical, negative

- provide no sense of identification or relationship with the evangelist

- use standardized content which does not vary in order take account of the specific needs of individual differing groups

- are not backed up by an empathetic and transparently open and honest teacher

These are clear strategies which apply to any type of teaching or evangelism program within a church. If we use the one-way lecture style of communication, we may find that our audience (and perhaps the whole congregation) will consist of self-selected well-educated people who can handle a 40-minute monologue. This is why interactive evangelistic Bible study programs such as *Alpha* work so well.

It is interesting to find that even in cultures where teaching has traditionally been hierarchical and unquestioned (often by rote), people quickly respond to this better form of communication after a short time of acclimatization.

How it fits the Web
The nature of the Internet fits well with many of these aspects of effective communication. We can build a sense of community into websites so that visitors feel they belong and can interact with both the webmaster and other site visitors. A self-deprecating use of humor is always valuable. Just as TV is not just radio with pictures, the Internet is not just linear text transferred to screen: it can be dramatically more. It is also a 'pull' medium that draws users to

specific pages based on their needs and interests. The user must feel in control, at home, and unthreatened. We must always assume that site visitors have no understanding of Christian words and concepts.

Learning more
To look at these issues in greater depth, check the links section from
http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/resources/learning.php

Local Website Development: principles
You may wish to develop a website for your own assembly. Here are some introductory suggestions:

- keep the site simple. Fancy backgrounds may get in the way of the message

- decide what image and message you want a visitor to get in the first few seconds, and design your front page to reflect this

- ensure pages do not take long to load – especially the front page

- make it easy for visitors to find their way around the site. A child of six should be able to do it!

- *update regularly*. If you can"t, then avoid time-sensitive information

- if search engines aren't generating enough traffic, try reciprocal links with other sources

- use interesting features (eg competitions, surveys, Q & A sections) to generate interest

- use the concepts mentioned above under *How Do People Learn*?

[Further reading: Walter P Wilson: *The Internet Church* (Word Publishing, Nashville, 2000)]