Learning curve: Intelligent pastors

by L. Gregory Jones in the August 7, 2007 issue

Josh Waitzkin, the chess prodigy who was the inspiration for the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, has written a book titled *The Art of Learning*. He describes his own approach to learning, first as a child learning chess, and then as a young adult learning to become a martial arts master.

Drawing on the work of developmental psychologist Carol Dweck, Waitzkin distinguishes between two theories of intelligence: entity theory, which sees intelligence as something you either have or you don't have, and incremental or learning theory, which stresses that people can, over time, master difficult material. Entity theorists, Waitzkin says, become brittle and are prone to quit when confronted with challenges, while learning theorists tend to rise to a challenge by learning more.

According to Waitzkin, many of his chess opponents relied on the static conviction that they would win because they were smart and talented. His coach, however, insisted that Waitzkin keep learning. He was taught to appreciate learning as an activity of apprenticeship, marked by creativity: he learned to respect and pay attention to perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting.

In this teaching, the quality of understanding and the mastery of fundamental skills matter more than quantity of knowledge or technique. "It is rarely a mysterious technique that drives us to the top," says Waitzkin, "but rather a profound mastery of what may well be a basic skill set. Depth beats breadth any day of the week, because it opens a channel for the intangible, unconscious, creative components of our hidden potential." Waitzkin calls the entire process "a journey in the pursuit of excellence."

What would Christian congregational ministries look like if they were committed to the art of learning an excellence patterned on Christ's life, death and resurrection? Do we invite people into an adventure of Christian faith and life? Do our invitations include a call to lifelong learning of clear fundamental skills accompanied by deepening understanding and practice?

When Malcolm X became a Muslim, he was told, “Don’t eat pork.” In *On Being a Jew*, the rabbi tells his secular Jewish nephew, who has decided to live as a Jew, that the first step is to “observe the Sabbath.” What do we say to someone who says to us, “I want to learn to live as a Christian”?

Many of us are ill-equipped to respond to such a question because we have assumed that anyone who’s grown up in North America already knows the basics of Christianity. Consequently, in too many congregations we don’t have structures and practices in place to help us teach and learn a Christian way of life. Seminaries too often presume that learning is only a process of critical assessment, rather than a process of cultivating faithful living for which effective “learning leaders” are needed.

In the early church’s practices of catechesis, people were invited to attend worship (though not the Eucharist); if they indicated an interest in being baptized, they would begin a process that typically lasted two years. An assigned mentor would help them discover fundamental skills and habits for perceiving, thinking, feeling and living in the light of the triune God. During the 40 days of Lent, they would receive instruction in the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostle’s Creed. After baptism on Easter, the new Christians would have eight more days of instruction.

This was an impressive commitment to shaping faithful Christian lives. The emphasis was on depth rather than breadth: understanding key doctrines and principles, developing significant relationships and cultivating basic skills of living in response to the triune God’s gracious presence.

The Roman Catholic Church’s Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program for new converts to the faith is adapted from the early-church catechesis. Some Protestant congregations in the United States have created similar catechetical programs—programs that reflect and embody vibrant Christian life. These churches seem to have learning cultures in their DNA.

What do these trends say about how we identify and form people to become clergy leaders of congregations? In part, they should persuade us that we need to expand our understanding of the intelligence and skills needed for leadership.

In a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Robert J. Sternberg, dean of arts and sciences at Tufts University, draws on research to suggest that college admissions processes are too narrow in their measurements of intelligence, which

typically assess and value only the analytical intellectual skills. Sternberg and his associates have experimented with ways to measure excellence in other dimensions of intelligence. They believe that they are measuring excellence on a more demanding and more expansive scale, and measuring people’s capacities for learning and their gifts for leadership.

A commitment to the art of learning invites congregations, judicatories and seminaries to work together to develop criteria for “learning clergy” who have the capacities to cultivate their intelligence through the interplay of creativity, analysis, practical skills and wisdom. It also invites us to assess and nurture more effectively the interplay of those dimensions of intelligence, especially in preparing people to become pastoral leaders.