



Wakefield Ministry Scheme



Teaching Adults Guidance for Tutors

Appendix Two An Example of 'Unlearning'

GR K6

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One of the features of Adult Learning that can make it a challenge people are reluctant to take up is that things often have to be 'un-learned'.

The following example is taken from Alan Rogers, Teaching Adults, Open University Press 2002. The example used may not seem particularly challenging to some, while others may not agree with everything in it: but it illustrates the principles involved in handling a necessary piece of 'unlearning' in order to facilitate new learning.

In any church training course which involves the narratives of the Christian Nativity, we will run up against the traditional stories of those who came to bring gifts to the infant. The existing information held by most of the student participants (i.e. that there were 'three kings') will be seen to be incorrect. We can pursue a number of strategies:

- We can *tell* the learners that they were not kings and that there were probably not three of them. Such a statement will be assessed and may even be accepted out of respect for our expertise, but it will lie uneasily on top of the earlier acquired knowledge because it has not challenged the source of that information. Within three or four minutes the participants will be talking of 'three kings' again.
- We can *show* them the narrative accounts in the New Testament that speak of 'certain wise men' (soothsayers or fortune tellers), not 'three' and not 'kings'. Such a reference will give cause for more serious reflection, and some will be convinced. Nevertheless, most of the student participants will within a relatively short time be talking once more in terms of 'three' and 'kings'.

We will not have challenged the weight of tradition and the emotional atmosphere of childhood, families, Christmas festivities and the constant reinforcement by Christmas cards, carols and the like, all of which have created an attachment to the idea of three kings.

- The only successful way to bring about the new learning will be through a process of *unlearning*. This will involve seeing how the two ideas ('three' and 'kings') arose in the first place- how the statement in the Psalms that 'kings from the east shall bring gifts' was quoted in the primitive Christian Church; how the early representations of the magi in pictures and mosaics with tall headdresses were taken by later interpreters to indicate royal imagery; how the fact that there were three gifts led to an assumption that there were three travellers etc. The students will thus understand the processes involved in the transformation of these stories, and their traditionally held views will become readjusted. They will see the constant reinforcement of incorrect knowledge for what it is, and when they themselves join again in references to 'three kings' they will hold a part of themselves back with an inner assertion that they now know better. Only as the learner comes to see *how* the description of the visitors in these narratives was altered will there be a major change in knowledge and attitudes. The story will be seen to be what it is: making an important theological statement, rather than historical truth.