

The first education communities – Saint Paul and the *ekklēsia*

Michael Victory¹

¹ Teacher Learning Network

Saint Paul's letters are not obvious sources for an inquiry into the education encounter, nor do the dominant narratives of Paul, as Saint or misogynist, immediately suggest that he is an educator with new insights for contemporary education encounters. However, Paul is an influential figure in western civilisation, and narrative constructions of him continue to shape contemporary society. The narrative of Paul as an educator that underpins this paper is a significant deviation from the narratives of Saint Paul from New Testament scholars and theologians, and from the vehement critics of Paul, including among others, Nietzsche. Rather the paper draws on the possibility that Badiou has opened with Paul as the universal subject. Badiou has offered a credible materialist interpretation of Paul's actions, wrestling the Pauline texts from the grasp of religious traditions.

This paper is based on a narrative inquiry that follows the three-dimensional model of Clandinin and Connelly. The source material for the inquiry are ten letters written by Paul to groups in the Mediterranean Basin between circa April 50 and the summer of 55 CE.

Paul travelled extensively forming communities, *ekklēsia*. These became communities where people interacted, emancipated from the restrictions of identity and committed to learning with, and from, each other about how to live a new life of *agapē*. People engaged in pure encounters unmediated by identity or the constraints of the physical space or time, and focused on learning how to live according to the new structures that Paul had initiated. *Agapē* called on each person, teacher and student, to commit to intersubjectivity and reflexivity.

In bringing *agapē* to light as part of the education encounter, we find purpose, dialogic communication, emancipation of the other, and a unique relationship between teacher and student. Paul's approach to education has reverberated through to modern society, and I argue that it foreshadows the education philosophies of Dewey, Biesta, Freire and Noddings.

The paper raises the possibility that there may be answers to the fragmentation, anxiety and confusion that characterises contemporary COVID life, in re-imagining foundation narratives of western society. This paper argues that Paul introduced universalisable practices that can enhance education encounters in the 21st century. It is suggested that Western democracies, currently in need of renewal, can find in Paul's initiation of *agapē* in the education encounter, an idea that could lead to ongoing renewal.