It's true: we're all called to be ministers

All of us are called to use our knowledge, skills and talents to further God's Kingdom, so how do we prepare for such a call?

Education For Ministry is a programme designed for all who take God's call seriously – deacons and priests and laypeople alike.

The programme comes from the Episcopalian University of the South in Tennessee and has been running in New Zealand for more than 25 years.

A holistic approach to ministry formation, it offers a rigorous study of Scripture and church history, as well as a challenging theological reflection component.

Over 600 students have completed the course in New Zealand. All continue to be learners, even the mentors, because the assumption is that we continue to grow and learn.

Here are comments from four past and present students across the country:

Kathy Hey, Waiapu

I found EFM to be a valuable study programme, and I highly recommend it.

Taking on study in my 60s was a challenge in itself. But group members respected each other's contributions and accepted the differing opinions, and this enriched the life of the group.

EFM was a soul-searching journey of faith, for which I'm very grateful. My faith was challenged, and my theology changed and developed.

The theological reflections that are part of the programme offered their own surprises and I continued to be amazed at the insights and prayers that flowed out of the group.

A consequence of EFM is that I'm better informed and can share my beliefs and theology in a way that I was unable to do before. EFM also helped me to identify and pursue a special area of ministry, lay preaching.

During EFM I visited European countries where significant church events took place. This brought alive the EFM studies and gave me a new interest in church history.

Frank Nelson, Wellington

My first hands-on experience of EFM was 1999 when I was sent from Hong Kong to Wellington to be trained as a mentor. Talk about a baptism of fire! Since then I haven't looked back and have started and mentored groups in Hong Kong, Lower Hutt and Wellington.

Among the comments I constantly hear are:

- Why did I wait so long before signing up?
- We really can say and think anything we like - and no one will jump on us!
- I never realised that's how it all fitted together.
- You mean there are other ways of interpreting that passage?

EFM informs my own life, especially in the discipline of theological reflection, making sense of what I read, preach and do. It is one of those weekly events that energises me (sleep is often evasive on Tuesday nights after our meetings).

I love the multi-level and multi-age group (22-70 plus) we have at present, seeing the surprise and confusion of those just starting, and the satisfaction of those a little further down the road as they recognise themselves in the beginners.

Don't go near EFM unless you are prepared to work hard. But once near, you're unlikely to stay away.

Education for Ministry

A programme of theological education and ministry formation available throughout New Zealand.

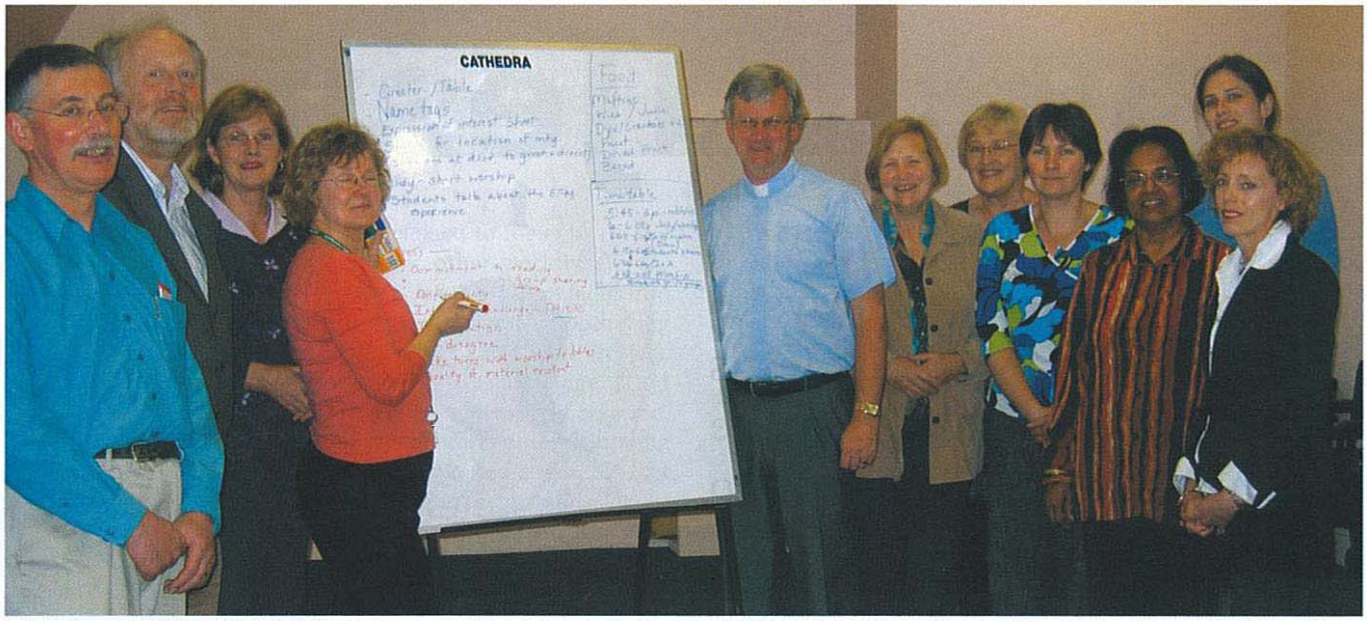
EFM provides in-depth theological education that enables all the baptized to study Old and New Testament and Church History, and better discern their own ministries.

For information about joining or forming a group with a trained mentor in your area, contact:

The National Administrator
Education for Ministry
PO Box 12-002, Wellington

Email: befmg@xtra.co.nz
Website: www.efm.org.nz

People Ministering to People



Dean Frank Nelson (centre) mentoring an EFM group: "It informs my own life."

Andrew Starkey, Canterbury

Kathryn and I began EFM in 1992 as part of a group in North Canterbury. After two years we moved to Auckland where I began study for a BTheol as part of preparation for ordination. Kathryn was involved with a group in Auckland, then we began a group as co-mentors in Hokitika after we moved to the West Coast.

I noticed a significant contrast between EFM and degree approaches to learning. The basic content of each was grounded in the same contemporary scholarly insights. However, there were two aspects of EFM that I found especially transformational apart from the material we read.

The first was mutual sharing of life stories. This not only built relationship and trust within the group; it also heightened my own self-awareness as I reflected on my personal story.

The other point of transformation came from the theological reflections. Although I found the process quite difficult at first it produced real fruits as we used the insights from Scripture and the church's story and the sometimes contrasting views of contemporary culture to address issues arising from significant personal experience. The process required us to engage at the level of our feelings and to arrive at a statement of our personal position from which we might act.

I've been ordained now for over 10 years, and EFM has been one of the most useful parts of my theological education, especially in my role as an enabler in Local Shared Ministry. I have also been delighted to watch the people I met through EFM engage in ministry with real confidence built on the foundations laid in EFM.

Anne Priestley, Auckland

EFM offers a balance of intellectual development and spiritual formation, group dynamics, liturgy, and pastoral care and boundaries. Fortunately, nobody told me all that in advance. I was attracted by the prospect of joining a group for serious Bible study. Everything else would have seemed irrelevant, incomprehensible or frankly scary.

The material did not insult the intelligence, being open enough to accommodate a wide range of theological perspectives. Fine! So why was I asked to meditate or write creatively? I had to learn to respond to Scripture from the heart. My experiments – cautious at first, then more willing – and the work of reflecting on those experiments deepened something for which I had no name.

Theological reflection (what was that? I wondered) turned out to be just as surprising. Its mysterious rules eventually developed into the natural steps of a dance – sometimes serious, sometimes playful – as together we discovered connections between Scripture and church history, politics, social trends, a movie or a book... Hidden opinions came to the surface, learning led to action.

Don't even get me started on how scary it was to share my story (I had a 'spiritual autobiography'?) or lead the group in worship. Wise mentoring and the deep trust generated within the group enabled me in these ways, and more. I remain profoundly thankful to EFM and those who accompanied me in it.

For more information check the EFM advertisement on the opposite page.

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