How can we help people learn in Church?

31 Jesus said to the people who believed in him, “You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. 32 And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

If people can grasp Jesus’ teachings and choose to apply them in a faithful way, then freedom and change will result. Consequently, a key question for church leaders must be: How can we help people to learn and understand Biblical truth?

Before providing treatment, a doctor has to make a diagnosis.

The Biblefresh website says: ‘In early 2006 some research was conducted by the Evangelical Alliance which revealed that low levels of biblical knowledge and understanding was becoming a significant and worrying issue in the Church. Anecdotally, we had received evidence from some of the Bible colleges and theological institutions that new students were increasingly bible illiterate. More time needed to be spent giving students a basic grounding before they could tackle other subjects.’

Why are there high levels of Biblical illiteracy?

In her book on learning styles, Carol Barnier notes that it is easy for a teacher to say: ‘Instead of saying that my method isn’t working, I proclaim you to be defective, a poor learner.’

In some churches, the preacher/teacher is someone who just knows a lot and who can all too easily treat the congregation like machines into which they download vast amounts of data into.

Wherever this is the case, not everyone will learn through this approach.

Churches often put a lot of thought into their teaching programmes. How might things change if we started to plan learning programmes with learning outcomes?

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1 John 8.32 (New Living Translation)
2 http://www.biblefresh.com/about/why-biblefresh/
In the film Despicable Me, Gru needs to gain entry to a house, but at every turn he is thwarted and knocked back. Eventually he is ready to give up having being repelled by a huge explosion but as he sits in the crater, Gru sees three young girls who are selling cookies gain entry to the house simply by knocking. Everything changes in that moment! Gru finds a better way forward and he expresses this by saying ‘LIGHTBULB’!

My prayer is that church leaders and preachers would have more 'Light Bulb' moments accompanied by the courage to consider how we can communicate more effectively in ways that will give everyone who wants to the opportunity to learn.

Do what you’re told or discover for yourself?

Education today is much more participatory than it used to be and Malcolm Knowles talks about the need for a shift ‘from teacher to facilitator of learning’\(^4\) Reflecting on his own experience in making this change, he says: ‘I had replaced getting rewards from controlling students with getting my rewards from releasing students. And I found the latter rewards much more satisfying’.\(^5\)

In most churches, teaching is done by a few with the rest learning from the enlightened. I believe that we need to spend time considering how we could apply the changes in education into our church contexts.

How can those of us that do teach do so in a way that equips people to think and handle the Bible for themselves? How can we encourage participation in learning?

The New Testament encourages participation. It speaks about ‘one anothering’ on 57 separate occasions\(^6\) e.g. ‘love one another’, ‘encourage one another’ etc. In a homegroup setting participation is a priority but on a Sunday many churches rely on a lecture style for teaching. Even a café church format can simply involve doing what we would have done in church anyway, but with the congregation sat around tables instead of in rows.

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\(^5\) Knowles, p253
\(^6\) Hughes B, (2001) *Small Group Know How*, Lion Hudson plc
The benefits of participatory learning are clear: ‘The more involved the student is, the better the understanding and knowledge gained from the assignment.’\(^7\) If this style of learning is so effective and it fits with the Biblical model of one anothering, why are we all not prioritizing it over our usual lecture style in church gatherings?

I suspect that for some we are doing church in the way we were taught to and so we are continuing with styles and approaches that were helpful to previous generations but that don’t work so effectively now.

For some, it’s about the disadvantages: Control is surrendered, there is more preparation work and less material can be covered in the same amount of time.\(^8\) As busy church leaders with only fifty two Sundays to communicate in each year, a participatory approach learning is something that we might feel we can’t afford.

For some it might be about resistance form our congregations who want to keep their churches the way the same.

As you look at the pictures of these two boats which would you rather be in? Do you want to be pulling on the oars with others alongside you or relaxing on a cruise ship? Which do you want your church to be like?

**Church leaders sometimes complain about passive members, but is this passivity a product of the way we do Church?**

**Are we helping people to live out their faith in their everyday lives?**

‘Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy’.\(^9\) Many Christians want to know how to connect their faith with real life, but in contrast: ‘Nationally 50% of Christians have never heard a sermon on work. Something that people spend 65% of their lives doing ’in the public arena’ as ’ordinary Christians’.’\(^10\) Part of the problem is that teaching programmes are often generated by church leaders.

\(^7\) Kimberlee D. S. “*Ropes, Poles, and Space: Active Learning in Business Education*” Active Learning in Higher Education July 2003 4: 159-167, p162
\(^8\) Kimberlee, p162-163
\(^9\) Knowles, p40
\(^10\) http://www.licc.org.uk/imagine/vision/the-sacred-secular-divide-/
who aren’t actively involved in working in secular workplaces. Are those of us in leadership willing to listen to the people in our churches to hear what subjects and topics that we could teach on which would be helpful to them?

**Learning styles**

As we seek to create churches where everyone can learn, we need to consider the variety of learning styles that people have. Here is a simple overview of some of the main theories:

**VAK**

VAK is possibly the most well known learning style theory and this is perhaps because its approach is the simplest. VAK has three dominant learning styles:

- **Visual** learners learn by seeing and reading.
- **Auditory** learners learn by listening and speaking.
- **Kinaesthetic** learners learn by touching and doing.

People will approach the same task in different ways based on their learning style. What is the first thing you do when you take a new gadget out of a box? Do you have to read the manual? Do you like to have someone with you to talk through how it works with? Can you not wait to turn it on and learn by using it? If you do need instructions, would you rather read them step by step or watch a tutorial video you can listen to?

**Gardner's Multiple Intelligences**

Howard Gardner initially identified seven intelligences. 'The first two are ones that have been typically valued in schools; the next three are usually associated with the arts; and the final two are what Howard Gardner called 'personal intelligences.'

- **Verbal-Linguistic intelligence (Word Smart):** Can use language well in its written or spoken form.

- **Logical-Mathematical intelligence (Logic Smart):** Analytical and rational. Can notice patterns, reason deductively and think logically.

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Visual-Spatial intelligence (Picture smart): The potential to recognize and use the patterns of wide space and more confined areas.

Musical intelligence (Music Smart): An appreciation of music and sounds.

Bodily/Kinaesthetic intelligence (Body Smart): Physically well coordinated and sporty.

Interpersonal intelligence (People smart): Understanding people and how and why they do things.

Intrapersonal intelligence (Self smart): Self aware and reflective.

Later Gardner also added Naturalist to the list of intelligences.


Gardner’s theory is incredibly positive as it recognizes that intelligence isn’t limited to just the academic. We all have a variety of intelligences and Gardner suggests most of us are strong in three types. This combination of intelligences will help us to identify ways through which we will learn more naturally.

KOLB Learning styles

David Kolb's model works on two different levels:

**A Four Stage learning cycle**

1. Concrete Experience (CE): Feeling
2. Reflective Observation (RO): Watching
3. Abstract Conceptualization (AC): Thinking
4. Active Experimentation (AE): Doing

**Learning styles**

1. Diverging (CE/RO)
2. Assimilating (AC/RO)
3. Converging (AC/AE)
4. Accommodating (CE/AE)

Each learning style is the combination of two areas that relate to how we think about things (feeling or thinking) and how we do things (doing or watching). It is also worth noting that the learning cycle is a useful tool for reflecting on and growing through an experience.

The four Kolb learning styles are:

**Diverging** (feeling and watching): These people prefer to watch rather than to do. They gather information and then use their imagination to solve problems. They are good at thinking outside of the box and at brainstorming.

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12 http://www.businessballs.com/howardgardnermultipleintelligences.htm#multiple intelligences tests
13 http://www.businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm
Assimilating (watching and thinking): These people are highly logical. Ideas and concepts are more important to them than people and they would rather have good explanations than practical opportunities. They can assimilate information and organise it clearly. Logically sound theories are more important to them than practical things. They prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models & having time to think/process.

Converging (thinking and doing): These people enjoy solving problems and finding solutions to practical issues. They prefer technical tasks and are not interpersonal. They like to experiment and be hands-on.

Accommodating (doing and feeling): These people like to be hands-on, but they rely on intuition not logic. They like new challenges and they commonly act on 'gut' instinct rather than logical analysis. They rarely carry out their own analysis, instead relying on others for information. They prefer to work in teams to complete tasks and will actively experiment trying different ways to achieve an objective.

**Honey and Mumford's variation on the Kolb system**

Although different language is used, there are similarities with Kolb’s four learning styles:

- **Reflectors** (similar to Diverging): Patient in gathering information. They will often listen before speaking.

- **Theorists** (similar to Assimilating): Logical in approach, they will assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories. They are objective thinkers and will often struggle with subjectivity.

- **Pragmatists** (similar to Converging): They love new ideas and are very hands on preferring to act than discuss. They enjoy problem solving tasks.

- **Activists** (similar to Accommodating): Outgoing extroverts who seek challenges and new experiences. They are open-minded and lose motivation when faced with ongoing tasks.

**Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains**

This theory consist of three overlapping areas:

1. *Psychomotor domain*: Manual and physical skills
2. *Cognitive domain*: Intellectual capability and knowledge
3. *Affective domain*: Attitude or feelings
Within each of these areas, there are different levels of development. Each level can only be reached when the previous one has been mastered. This is something that sets this theory apart as it looks at what it means to develop and stretch ourselves within our most natural learning style. This table\(^\text{14}\) shows the levels of development.

![Table of Learning Styles]

So where do we go from here?

This brief and very simplistic survey of various learning style theories shows the complexity of this whole area. Consequently it is all too tempting to bury our heads in the sand and to approach learning in Church in the way that we have always done. I hope by now we all realize that this isn’t a serious option if we want people to learn effectively so that they can grow in their faith.

I think that there is also a danger of becoming obsessed with learning styles in a way that leads to trying to pigeonhole people with a specific learning style in a narrow minded kind of way. I believe that our aim as churches, should be to offer a variety of approaches to learning rather than trying to diagnose people’s individual learning styles.

**Lavish Learning: A Simplified model**

At the end of my learning styles research I felt discouraged and overwhelmed. There was too much information and too many approaches to do anything helpful with. Thankfully I found a way forward by creating a simpler model that attempts to harmonise the key points of the various theories. I have summarised the various learning styles under these six headings:

\(^{14}\) https://www.businessballs.com/self-awareness/blooms-taxonomy-6/
**Logical**: Learning through information being received in a clear, rational and informative way.

Covers: Auditory, linguistic, logical mathematical, cognitive domain, assimilators/theorists and converging/pragmatists.

**Active**: Learning in a hands-on way.

Covers: Kinaesthetic, psychomotor domain, converging/pragmatists accommodating/activists.

**Visual**: Learning through what we see

Covers: Visual and spatial.

**Interactive**: Learning through interaction and participation eg discussion.

Covers: Interpersonal

**Space**: Learning through reflecting and processing information

Covers: Intrapersonal, diverging/reflectors and assimilating/theorists

**Heart**: Learning through feelings and emotions.

Covers: Musical intelligence, affective, diverging/reflectors and accommodating/activists.

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**Lavish Learning: Some practical ideas**

**Logical**

This is the main approach used by many churches. Sermons often fit this model and those of us who preach need to work at making the material that we present logical and coherent.

People who prefer learning in this way may struggle with simple faith and we need to ensure that we don’t belittle them in the way we teach things; for example simply proclaiming that we have to believe everything without questioning is not helpful to a Logical/Rational learner. Apologetics are useful for Christians with this learning style as it enables them to engage rationally with areas of faith.

In wanting to explain things well, we should let go of assumptions about what people know. I remember the visitor at the end of a Good Friday service who said to me that it was a shame that Jesus was dead. Even with our regular church members, it is easy to assume that they do understand all about our church vision because we did explain it during one Sunday last year.
We even need to consider the language that we use in teaching and be willing to explain technical language in appropriate ways for those who are listening.

To suggest supplementary reading at the end of a sermon or to have some suggestions for this in the church bulletin can be helpful as a logical learner may want more material on a subject.

**Active/Hands-on**

Apart from communion, there are relatively few opportunities to be hands-on in a church service. Rob Parsons makes the point that most boys don’t like sitting still, sitting, reading and listening to lectures which is one of the reasons why so many teenage boys drop out of church.15

One way of providing a hands-on experience is to make use of prayer stations. A prayer station is a space that allows someone to consider and reflect upon their faith. It can be an image with some instructions or it can involve actions e.g. light a candle, put a pin in the world map to indicate a person or country you are praying for, etc.

When considering a sermon, ask: ‘Can I reinforce or teach this theme in a hands-on way’:

For example, on Easter Sunday, you could give every person a small stone to hold and to consider how easy it is for them to move, and then make the point that God rolled away the stone and it was easy for him to move. You can encourage people to carry that stone with them through the week as a reminder of their faith in God’s power to do the impossible.

In a sermon talking about growth, people could take away a seed to plant and to care for. As they watch it grow, it will remind them of their faith. Or you could have a set of bricks that people could help build into a tower as an act of faith to show that God wants to build us up.

Active people are better when they are doing something and so you may want to encourage people to take notes during a talk. Perhaps it might be helpful to include a blank section in a weekly notice sheet as space for this and having pens available. Sometimes in a service we put out colouring pens and paper so that anyone can respond artistically as the rest of us are singing.

**Visual:** Learning through what we see

It has been said that ‘a picture paints a thousand words’. Most churches have the facilities to project images in some way which makes it relatively easy to use pictures. For example, this image could be used to talk about God being our Rock. It is of Kjeragbolten, a boulder located on the mountain Kjerag in Norway. The rock itself is only 5 cubic metres but it is wedged securely making it safe to stand on despite the 984 metre drop below. This is a picture of what life can feel like as a Christian, we know God is our Rock and we are secure in him but things still feel precarious at times! In these moments will we look to God and remember we are secure or will we let fear take over?

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15 Parsons R (2011), Getting your kids through church without them ending up hating God, Monarch Books, p32
Visual aids are also helpful. The Bible says: ‘No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.’\textsuperscript{16} This thought can be illustrated by a mug with water in (the water can’t be seen) and a glass to pour the water into (making the water known).

The Bible doesn’t contain pictures, but it does contain large amounts of descriptive language and it is worth working at using this sort of language in sermons. I may not be able to show people a picture of what I am talking about, but I can attempt to use the kind of language that will help people picture it in their minds.

Video can also helpful if we have the means to play it clearly and professionally. The ‘Despicable Me’ clip I referred to at the beginning of this document could be played to introduce a talk about guidance or needing revelation. The scene where Greg says grace from the film ‘Meet the Parents’ is an excellent insight into how many people view prayer as being about using formal and religious sounding words. There are also many excellent (and some not so excellent) Christian videos that are readily available through You Tube.

**Interactive:** Learning through interaction and participation eg discussion.

With the New Testament emphasis on ‘one anothering’, it is surprising that our services aren’t more interactive.

Discussion groups can easily be used as part of a sermon slot or even talking to the person next to you if the question is straightforward.

Should we allow people to ask questions in the sermon? Many preachers might be reluctant as this could disrupt their flow but we need to consider that if someone asks a clarifying question then it’s possible that other people may have the same question and that they will all learn more as a result. I have heard of some preachers using social media for people to ask questions during sermons and certainly this will help people who aren’t confident in speaking out.

I first heard of the concept of a DIY sermon several years ago. A DIY sermon presents the participants with a Bible passage, a few questions and space for discussion and feedback. The advantage of a DIY sermon is that you are helping people to engage with the Bible and to think about it for themselves. In a recent DIY sermon on ‘Finding God’s Heart’, I briefly told the story of Nehemiah 1-2 and then asked the question; ‘What things could have stopped Nehemiah from travelling to Jerusalem?’ After feedback, we then asked; ‘What things stop us from becoming the people that God wants us to be?’ We then finished by considering how we can overcome those things and I shared a few general points on this.

Where a church struggles with the concept of interaction in a service, space can still be allowed for the thought process by asking something like: ‘What comes to mind when you see this picture?’ Working harder at involving more people in the service so that more people can be heard from is also useful.

**Space:** Learning through reflecting and processing information

One of my biggest failings is that I usually try to cram too much into a service. In recent years there has been something of a rediscovery amongst Evangelicals of

\textsuperscript{16} John 1.18
the importance of contemplation and as Baptists who can be very active we need to embrace this. Learning to slow down and to build moments of pause into our services is vitally important. There are many helpful approaches to contemplation such as Lectio Divina where a short passage of scripture is read three times with a space to reflect each time. The first time we ask people to listen for a word or phrase, the second, to consider what is God is saying in that word or phrase and the third time to reflect on what is God is showing us to do. Listening to music or having images can be helpful in providing a focus. Often music without lyrics is best or if lyrics are used, then something simple and slow and repetitive such as Taizé can work well.

During a recent service we used prayer stations and afterwards someone said to me: ‘I’ve been feeling unhappy and I know that something hasn’t been right in myself for some time now. That space this morning gave me an opportunity to reflect on it. Thank you’. I was so glad for the person sharing, but equally so sad that in those past few weeks of attending church, this person hadn’t found that space. Even our quieter more reflective moments in services can have agendas where we ask people to focus on a particular thing. I believe that we need more space where we give people permission to be still and to reflect for themselves.

**Heart:** Learning through feelings and emotions.

In our communication, we need to ensure that we have life and enthusiasm, rather than just being downloaders of information. A really good way to communicate on a heart level is to use a well told story or illustration. These illustrations need to be connected to the teaching theme in order for it to be a part of the learning experience.

Music also communicates on a heart level and people with this learning style will often enjoy longer times of sung worship. A piece of music to listen to perhaps accompanied by a slideshow of appropriate images can also be helpful in communicating and helping people to reflect.

Humour also communicates on a heart level. The use of some humour can help people with this learning style to maintain a focus during a talk. If humour can also be linked to a teaching point, this can be very useful at helping people to remember.

Using a video or a well presented drama also has the potential to communicate on a heart level.

**Do you like ice cream?**

When I was a young, it felt like there was very limited selection of ice cream flavours and consequently a choice of which one you would like could be made relatively quickly. Making the same choice today can take a lot longer as there are so many different options that it can be bewildering.

The variety of learning styles which the different theories put forward can also be bewildering. I hope that my simpler model is of some help in trying to make sense of learning styles, and in considering how we can apply the different styles as part of learning within our churches.

One of the best ways of making a choice of ice cream flavour is to combine different varieties and this is a helpful analogy for teaching. Combining the learning styles will create the best approach. Here are some ideas of approaches that can make good combinations of the six styles:
Prayer stations are naturally Visual and using them gives people Space. If we vary the content of different stations, we can easily provide a Logical (lots of use of words), Active (eg stick this on, light this candle etc) and Heart (emphasising feelings in a response) focus. We always give people the option to sit still allowing Space rather than looking at the prayer stations. Also, if people wish, they can talk and pray with someone allowing Interaction. (You can find some great ideas on the Prayer Spaces for school website).

Sermons should be Logical and informative. Visuals can be used to reinforce the points, Interaction can take place in discussion and feedback, Space can be allowed to reflect on a point and stories can communicate at a Heart level. If a physical object is used as a response, then sermons can even be Active.

If we feel strongly about the flavours we like, then we will feel equally (if not more) strongly about what we don’t like. As we try to help people learn through a variety of styles, we need to be considerate of others whose learning styles are different. I have found that discussion groups on a Sunday morning are one of the best examples of the Marmite factor; that people either love or hate them. Part of the answer is to remind people that our faith involves preferring one another in love and this involves putting aside our preferences at times. If we have a good variety of all six styles, then it is also easier for people to cope with a style that they find difficult. It is also worth considering if there is a way of allowing people to opt out of a particular style of learning either by being still or perhaps providing another choice?

We need to work together to get the job done.

You can’t be good at everything: Using a variety of approaches in your church learning programme is maybe best implemented by a variety of people with different learning styles and gifts. Involving other people in your planning is useful e.g. if you are not visual, then give your main teaching points to someone who is and ask them to come up with some visual aids.

In trying to make changes, it is often true that busyness is our greatest enemy. You may like and agree with much of what you have read here, but it is important to make space to implement change. In discussions with other ministers, it is clear that many of us have a leaning towards an Interactive learning style. If this is true then it's sad if we try and learn primarily in our offices in a Logical style. Making space to discuss change with others may be a good way forward for some of us.

You may find it helpful to fill out the Church Evaluation Sheet as a way of thinking through the issues raised.

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https://honestaboutmyfaith.wordpress.com/learning-styles-and-church/

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## LAVISH LEARNING: Church Evaluation Sheet
(This is best filled out by several different people and discussed together)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logical: Learning rationally.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do we communicate in a clear, rational and informative way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can we improve in this area?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active: Learning in a hands-on way.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much of our church life allows learning in an Active/hands-on way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can we improve in this area?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual: Learning through what we see</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well do we use visuals to help people to learn in Church?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can we improve in this area?</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interactive: Learning through participation.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do we create opportunities for people to learn through interaction or discussion?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can we improve in this area?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space: Learning through reflecting and processing information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do we allow space in our services for people to reflect?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can we improve in this area?</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Heart: Learning through feelings and emotions.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In what ways do we communicate with people at a heart level?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can we improve in this area?</td>
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</table>

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Interactive https://openclipart.org/detail/23589/team

Space https://openclipart.org/detail/169038/windows-media-player-pause-button


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