



Making Adult Group Study Relevant

Introduction

In writing about educating Christians for living in a pluralistic culture, American church historian Martin Marty has observed that programs of Christian education in congregations have not adequately addressed the challenges faced in our surroundings, which have become as diverse culturally and religiously as those experienced by the early church. Marty writes that “most American Christians are woefully unprepared to be responsible agents of their faith. They know too little of its story, its teaching, and its moral framework to exemplify and testify to their faith in a pluralist society. And they know too little about how to live and respond to a pluralistic culture. So they blend into the culture or are overwhelmed by it, or they desert the faith for one or another of the options in it.”

I think Marty is right about congregations failing to address the challenges of living in our world. It’s difficult to grow in knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith when the only regular practice of faith is participation in Sunday worship. Making a commitment to learn in a small-group setting with a community of other thoughtful Christians offers adults of all ages the chance to be educated for living faithfully in this world.

Perhaps you know the group you’ll be teaching very well; perhaps it’s a class you have been participating in or leading. Or maybe you’ve agreed to lead a few sessions on topics that have interested you from one of the five themes of *The Thoughtful Christian*: Bible and Theology, Popular Culture, Contemporary Issues, Spirituality, and Christian Living.

In addition to knowing about the learners and the content you will be teaching, it is important to reflect

on the purposes of Christian education and your role as teacher in a group of thoughtful Christians. Think about these questions:

- Consider your own understandings and connections with the topic you will lead. In what ways does it relate to your life of faith? What is your purpose in teaching this topic?
- Recall a time when a connection was made for you between the content of the Christian faith and its impact on your life of faith. What are your hopes for those you will be teaching?
- Remember the context of the congregation as you think about teaching and learning with a group of adults. In what ways do these purposes and hopes connect with the mission of this congregation?

Teaching an adult group in your church using resources from *The Thoughtful Christian* offers you the opportunity to help adult learners of all ages reflect on the content of the Christian faith and the challenge of clarifying their beliefs for the purposes of faithful living in God’s world. This essay is written to help you consider the ways that educational ministry can be a transforming experience that supports adult learners in their commitments to living faithfully and thoughtfully in response to God’s call to their lives.

Integrated Learning

As a church educator, I was invited by some adults in a congregation for a conversation about adult education. They were interested in forming a new class for the church school hour on Sunday morning. Four existing classes were already meeting, but these people wanted something different. They wanted to learn through a

variety of teaching methods: experiential, discussion, something more than lecture. They also wanted more freedom with regard to choice of topic than was available in denominational curriculum for adults. We met for conversation, and they identified one additional important goal. They wanted the content and process of teaching and learning to connect with the context so that adults of all ages across the life span would be welcome to participate.

They eventually named themselves the Peripatetic Class because they were committed to wandering around a variety of topics and connecting them to faith and life: politics, including local and national elections and the role of the Christian as citizen; ethics and life issues; justice issues and the world economy; and connecting faith and life at church and home through celebration of the church seasons.

Three factors were important in the success of this model of adult religious education:

1. *The planning group was a visible example of the varieties of gifts that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 12.* Some members were knowledgeable about content of the study. Others were very familiar with methods of teaching and learning with adults. One person was very skilled in group process and knew the importance of enabling individual learners to become a community. And then there were the extroverts in the group who met visitors at the door and invited them to try this class. They all came together as individuals from the various places in their lives—their work, their homes, their roles as leaders in the congregation and the community—and modeled the kind of formation in Christian identity and practice that they sought to enable in the class they were leading.
2. *The class modeled shared leadership in planning and teaching.* Teachers emerged from within the group based on topic and time of year. Since many of these adults also taught children or youth in the church school, short-term topics in this class allowed them the flexibility to move in and out of a leadership role. Adults enjoyed volunteering to teach this group because there was a level of commitment on the part of the participants to be present and engaged with the topic.
3. *The group was committed to gathering together once a quarter outside of class for a community event.* These

gatherings might include a meal at someone's home, a Shrove Tuesday pancake dinner that they hosted for the congregation, or a mission project in the community.

Daniel Aleshire has written that "Christian education involves those tasks and expressions of ministry that enable people (1) to learn the Christian story, both ancient and present; (2) to develop the skills they need to act out their faith; (3) to reflect on that story in order to live self-aware to its truth; and (4) to nurture the sensitivities they need to live together as a covenant community."¹

In this statement Christian education is defined in terms of instruction, community life, human development, and faithful response in the world. Classes, small groups, or whatever name is given to opportunities for adult learning in your church—every gathering time can include time for these four foci. Groups come together in God's name, have a prayer, read from the Bible, check in with one another, spend time in discussion, deal with difficult topics and issues of the day, and go out renewed for living the life of faith.

Thoughtful Teaching

When I was a teenager, weekends had a different rhythm than the rest of the week. My mother was a life-long teacher of three-year-olds in our church. Shared space with weekday programs meant that the best time for her to prepare the learning space for her class was on Saturday morning. And so my sister and I would sometimes go with her to get the room ready, because, she said, "learning happens when the first child walks in, and I want it to be ready."

We usually spent at least two to three hours getting the learning centers set up—books, worship, housekeeping, blocks and puzzles, and art. Pictures were hung at the eye level of a three-year-old. The last step was to put a poster outside the door that would tell parents the purpose and focus of the day's class.

I know that much thinking and planning, reading, and study had already taken place before we ever walked into the classroom on Saturday morning. Now I realize that "getting the room ready" involves more than creating an inviting learning space. My mother took care of the room she made for her life of faith. She tended it

and nurtured it as she would a young plant. Her Bible and her teaching manual both evidenced the signs of great study.

Settings of Christian education provide teachers with the opportunity to engage adults with content of the Christian faith and its meaning and interpretation for their life. As teachers we hope that adult learners will be able not only to articulate what they believe but also to reflect on how that belief is embodied in their lives.

But before we begin to think about the people we teach, it is essential to prepare our own hearts and minds for teaching that is thoughtful and faithful. We are called by God to live in response to our baptism, to use the gifts God has given us in ministry. Teaching is a gift of the Spirit, and it involves a commitment of head and heart. Teaching in the church is an act of professing faith.

To say “I believe” is to profess faith. *Credo* means literally “I set my heart.” In writing about belief systems, Sara Little has identified four functions:

- To help a person make sense of the world and have a frame of reference for understanding, caring, deciding, and doing.
- To aid a community (the church) to achieve identity and maintain continuity.
- To link human experience and the Christian tradition through an interpretation that internalizes meaning and gives direction to life. This includes dialogue with self and dialogue with others that enables a kind of learning that is both an “internalized and transformational knowing.”
- To link lives of individuals and communities to larger, ultimate realities and purposes. “From the perspective of the Christian tradition, the individual and the community are both incomplete, apart from the transcendent.”²

Settings of Christian education with adults reveal purposes that connect individuals, the Christian tradition, the community of faith, and the world. Notice Little’s carefully chosen words that emphasize the individual’s activity of constructing a frame of reference. Such individuals are connected to and find meaning in participation in a community of faith. Experiences in worship, education, and mission nurture and challenge people

in their lives of faith and support them in the commitments they make to witness in the diverse communities in which they live and work.

The Examen is an ancient spiritual practice written by Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* published in 1541. For Ignatius, the Examen was practiced in terms of identifying consolations and desolations, or highs or lows. A contemporary use of the Examen involves closing each day with two questions: For what am I most grateful? For what am I least grateful?

The four functions of belief systems identified by Little are useful for teachers in reflection and evaluation of sessions of teaching and learning with adults. If these questions were printed for all to see, they could also be used as a means of silent reflection by each person at the end of the class, like a form of the Examen:

1. Where in this session did I work to make sense of the world in light of this particular study? What clues for understanding, caring, deciding, and doing were provided either in the content or the discussion?
2. In what ways did this study speak to our congregation, our faith community, and its identity?
3. As I think about this study today, in what ways does it connect me to the Christian tradition? In what ways has this study raised questions for my life of faith? Where has my life of faith been disturbed, transformed, or affirmed?
4. In what ways has this study connected me to the holy, the transcendent, and the work of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life?

Faithful Living

Pilgrimage in Faithfulness (PIF) is a course that is required of all entering students at McCormick Theological Seminary. It is a foundational introduction to three important concepts in theological education: baptism, Eucharist, and ministry. This four-hour evening class involves a plenary session, dinner, small-group discussion, and worship. It is team taught by five faculty members representing the different fields in theological education: theology/ethics, ministry, history, and Bible.

Recently a congregation in Chicago adapted this model for a PIF class for its adults on Thursday evenings. The course worked so well that the congregation has added

a second level of class for those who have completed the first course. “Graduates” of PIF now coordinate and lead small groups in the basic course. Clergy from their staff and our faculty members serve as teachers. Class members agree to be present for class and to complete assigned reading for each session.

Carol Lakey Hess has written about the importance of providing a space for teaching and learning where “conversational education” can take place, one that is characterized by “hard dialogue and deep connections.”³ Such conversational education invites people to invest themselves deeply both with the topic and with one another. Such a community of learners holds one another accountable for transformative learning.

This model of adult education is an example of conversational education that takes place around the dinner table, in engagement with the plenary topic and teacher, and in dialogue in small groups. Hard dialogue is encouraged in this setting of teaching and learning. The evening ends with brief worship in the chapel, which provides space and time for individuals to make deep connections.

Conclusion

Whether you are teaching one class or several different courses, remember the ways you and this group of learners are connected to the whole life of the congregation. Consider the ways that this setting for teaching and learning is an opportunity for you and other adults to grow in knowledge and experience in the life of faith. Think about the ways that this adult group

of learners is a part of a congregational commitment to faithful education.

Religious instruction focuses its attention on the content of the Christian faith, the environment of teaching and learning, and methods and group processes. Religious instruction seeks primarily to educate Christians for faithful living, for finding a balance between the sacred and the secular, between the holy and the ordinary, between the sacraments in liturgy and the ways we live in response to our baptisms as we move out from the table where Jesus Christ is the host. Religious instruction must focus on helping adult learners of all ages frame their lives in terms of a new way of seeing, hearing, sensing, being, and finally doing because of their faith in God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.⁴

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Daniel Aleshire, “Finding Eagles in the Turkey’s Nest: Pastoral Theology and Christian Education,” *Review and Expositor* 85 (1988): 699.
2. Sara Little, *To Set One’s Heart: Belief and Teaching in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1983), 18–21.
3. Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women’s Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 182.
4. Elizabeth F. Caldwell, “Religious Instruction: Homemaking,” in *Mapping Christian Education*, ed. Jack Seymour (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 80.