

What is a church supposed to teach?

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Our congregation, thanks to the leadership of our adult education team, has been thinking and talking about wholesale revisions to our educational offerings for adults.

Up until recently, our church has "educated" adults through a traditional Sunday School, which (if you haven't been to one of late) consists of 60-minute long classes on Sunday mornings. Many of these classes (thanks to our congregation's wealth of leadership) are led by teachers with theology degrees or some other professional qualification. It's a traditional model for education: an "expert" prepares a curriculum and presents it and students listen and ask some questions and read a bit on their own.

- The pluses of this model are that great teachers, who know the material, can bring it to life.
- The downside of the model is that it relies on experts too much, but doesn't necessarily *create* experts. The mode of learning (pedagogy) doesn't allow the students to become masters of the subject matter.

In some churches, the small group has eclipsed the traditional Sunday School class as the paradigm for education. A group of 6-12 folks will meet to discuss a prepared curriculum, with an emphasis on conversation.

- This model is more participatory--every person's voice and perspective is valued, which is a worthy goal for any educational program.
- What's lost in this model, however, is depth. Prepared curriculum is always thinner than what a gifted teacher brings, and leaders often do not have the training and experience to guide participants through the deepest spiritual waters. Conversation gets easily sidetracked by individuals moving tangentially to the subject matter.

The conundrum: what is a church "school" supposed to look like?

One problem I perceive is that we've been asking the *wrong questions*. We've focused on content rather than on the larger vision. We've wondered too much about "what topic should we be teaching?" and too little about "what is the goal of learning?" Topics and methods follow after the bigger vision.

Here's what I'm working with now as a vision for a church-based educational program:

1. **Self-feeding.** The goal of a church education program is to nurture curiosity and teach learning skills so that every person is empowered to feed their own intellect and spiritual hunger. I hope for church members who are excited and resourceful about their own life-long learning.
2. **Learning is individualized, but communal in nature.** Each person may have slightly different passions and interests, but every person needs a "school" to create a social context for learning. We never learn in isolation. Learning is a social process.
3. **Learning is focused toward change.** We don't learn to re-enforce what we already know. We learn so that we can grow and change. We want to answer difficult questions. We want to gain skills we don't have. We want to help our community solve big problems. Learning has a transformational purpose.
4. **Learning is about doing, not just knowing.** It's more important to do the good than to simply know what's good. Learning should be practiced in the body, not just considered in the mind.
5. **Students become teachers.** If any one of us has studied and engaged something in depth for a sustained period of time, we should be accountable to the community to share what we have learned.
6. **Learning for the sake of love.** Learning has a moral quality to it. The things that are "worth" learning are things that move us toward worthwhile ends. Learning how to enrich ourselves, how to make ourselves beautiful or powerful or more spiritual--these are only worthwhile if by doing so we can feed others, empower others, make the community healthy and strong.

What do you think? Does your church's educational program have a vision? Does your method of teaching (pedagogy) match the vision?

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