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Developing Teachers and Leaders for Effective Adult Education

BY DAVID WRAY

Education has always been critical to the church. Teaching, when examined biblically and historically, has not been an option but an apostolic mandate. Jesus came to the earth and spent his time as an authoritative teacher. In Matt 28:18–20, Jesus clearly states that new disciples are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and taught to obey everything the Lord has commanded. Perry Downs, reflecting on the Matthew 28 principle, says:

Teaching is central to the Lord's plan, indicating its centrality in the life of the church. Properly understood, Christian education is a critical means of maintaining the life of the church and of moving the church forward. It was critical in the life of the Lord and became critical in the life of the church.¹

In another Matthew passage, readers are told that Jesus' example was the highest form of teaching: "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher" (Matt 10:24–25a NRSV). Robert Pazmiño, adding another teaching principle from Jesus' ministry, says: "Doing and teaching are linked (Matt 7:24–27) with Jesus' disciples' called to live by his commandments and to teach others to do the same" (Matt 5:19).²

As one moves from gospel principles concerning teaching to Pauline principles, Eph 4:11–16 comes to mind.

Naming spiritually gifted individuals in the church, Paul reminds congregational leaders of the priority of teachers. Pastor-teachers, among others, are to prepare (equip) the saints for the work of service in order to build up the body of Christ. Teaching through word and deed is seminal in equipping Christians for works of service.

Church leaders, usually with an understanding of the biblical principles about teaching as the foundation for their planning, spend many hours prayerfully structuring education ministries in their congregations. They devote no little expense, time, and effort to children's ministry, working to ensure that children are exposed to the latest curriculum, housed in brightly decorated classrooms, and taught by individuals with extensive pedagogical training who work diligently to help each child grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).

Adolescent ministry frequently receives similar prayerful attention. Youth ministers often are employed, classrooms furnished with current technology and godly teachers, mission trips planned, and a full-scale youth program established to provide every spiritual opportunity for the youth of our congregations to grow in faith.

Unfortunately, congregational leaders may not be as intentional or as knowledgeable about creative, effective adult education ministries as they are about those for children and youth. Gilbert Peterson claims that more adults are involved in some type of formal learning situation in America than all the children and youth enrolled in our

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public and private school systems.³ Bookstore shelves are filled with volumes that describe adults as lifelong and self-directed (andragogical) learners. Malcolm Knowles, Stephen Brookfield, Patricia Cross, and scores of other authorities in adult learning argue that adults are highly motivated to grow and learn every day.⁴ This literature claims that adults are curious learners. They are highly motivated to learn. Many are anxious to identify ways to improve their marriages, raise healthy children, excel in their work, and improve in their hobbies. If these adult education authorities are correct, why do church leaders often characterize adult learners in the church as lazy, lacking in biblical knowledge, and generally uninterested in adult education provided by the church? Are adults lifelong learners in every aspect of their lives except the spiritual? Or could it be that congregations have adult teachers who are poorly trained, use only one teaching/learning style, and have a limited understanding of the Bible themselves? The answers to these questions are complex, and solutions are often elusive. The purpose of this article is to identify ways in which congregational leaders can develop teachers for effective adult education.

As church leaders prayerfully and strategically plan an effective adult education ministry, what should their vision for the ministry be? What types of individuals should be teaching the adults in the congregation? What training and equipping should these Christians receive in order to be effective in their task? What format (lecture, question and answer, discussion around tables, etc.) should be used in the teaching/learning process? What other leaders will be necessary for the adult ministry to be effective? How can they ensure that adults are being spiritually formed into the image of Christ as they grow and mature in their spiritual walk? Let's examine each of these questions as we explore an effective adult education ministry.

Vision for Adult Education

Christian education for adults is much broader than that of formal learning experiences in the church; however, rather than examining small groups, service projects, and other nonformal and informal settings, the focus of this article will be on developing teachers for the context of adult classes.

Rick Yount provides vision for effective adult education ministries: "To be like Christ. What a goal! Strong but gentle. Just but loving. Truthful but merciful. Demanding but accepting."⁵ Every adult member of a congregation growing in Christlikeness is a biblical and theological vision that needs to be constantly held up before the congregation. This journey calls for every adult to be more like the Lord today than yesterday, and to press on to be more like him tomorrow. Perhaps the beginning point for accomplishing this vision resides in the individuals invited to teach adults in our congregations.

Selecting Adult Teachers in the Church

James' serious admonition, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers . . . because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly," (Jas 3:1 NIV) should cause church leaders to proceed in the selection of adult teachers with prayer, wisdom, and discernment. Leaders do best when they invite as teachers of adults those who demonstrate a life of "integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us" (Titus 2:7 NIV). Adult classroom learners are wise and discriminating when it comes to assessing the one who stands before them to teach. If the teacher's life isn't Christlike, and if the biblical message spoken doesn't match the claim of Christlikeness, little consideration is given for anything taught in the classroom.

Parker Palmer writes about this principle when he proclaims that "we teach who we are." His book *The Courage to Teach* investigates the premise that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."⁶ Not surprisingly, the first printing of his book sold out in the first three months after it was published. Writing for higher education, Palmer recognizes that administrators and teachers in public colleges and universities are looking inward as they deal with external pressures and realities. If public higher education leaders are discussing the importance of

sustaining authenticity, wholeness, and self-renewal, how much more important is it for church leaders to prayerfully select teachers of God's word who demonstrate the same attributes? Spiritually maturing teachers are critical for an effective adult Christian education program. However, in addition to having a godly character, teachers need to be equipped for the task.

Training and Equipping Adult Teachers

Instead of simply inviting individuals to teach adult classes about content in which they have a keen interest, some congregations coordinate the Sunday morning sermon with the adult classes. This allows the preaching minister to address the curriculum from the pulpit, and the adult classes are then able to struggle with the implications of the theological concepts presented in the sermon (assuming that worship precedes adult classes). In many of these congregations, teachers are trained to help students integrate life and faith in weekly equipping sessions (usually held on Wednesday nights). During these sessions the adult class teachers, as well as church members interested in becoming teachers, thoroughly exegete the text for the next Sunday morning and discuss strategies to assist adults in translating the biblical truths into daily Christlike behaviors.

The equipping sessions often identify future adult teachers. When I was a minister of adult ministries, a Christian who had never taught adults regularly attended the Wednesday night equipping series. He called me one day and asked if I had an adult class he could teach. He went on to say, "I can't stand to attend this class every week, learn all of these wonderful biblical lessons, and not share them with others!" Perhaps this strategy of regularly equipping adult teachers will not only enhance the quality of the teaching, but perhaps also provide an adequate number of adult teachers to allow for manageable size classes.

Since adult Bible class teachers, like the students in their classes, are lifelong learners, they also seek out ways to improve their teaching on their own. Books, videos, web sites, workshops, lectureships, and college classes all are being used by teachers of adults. Wise church leaders provide lending libraries and other resources necessary to equip teachers of adults for effective church education.

Teaching/Learning Theory for Adult Education

Teachers of adults need to be aware of recent theories in the field of adult education. Throughout history debate

has raged about both the comparative value and the most effective methods of teaching content (biblical/theological information) and life application. When a congregation emphasizes only the transmission of biblical content, the result may be adults who think of the Bible only as information recorded thousands of years ago. On the other hand, when felt needs receive too much consideration, the result is often adults who are better versed in psychology than theology. Either ditch, content or application, keeps adults from seeking the high road of a balance between the two extremes. When teachers of adults engage in the unproductive argument about which teaching methodology is supreme (lecture, small group, multimedia, etc.), they miss an important principle: the best method is the one that a teacher chooses intentionally to accomplish specific goals—and does not use week in and week out. Using a variety of methods helps teachers of adults to travel the high road between content and application. Perhaps a better question would be how theology (and theological reflection) can provide a basis for all decisions of life.

Theological reflection, an approach embraced today by some teachers of adults, operates on the premise that adults should have a working knowledge of scripture, church history (heritage), and personal experience. Theological reflection puts our experience into a genuine conversation with our religious heritage. The conversation opens the gates between our experience and our Christian heritage.⁷ This three-legged stool suggests that before people can behave in a Christlike way, they must know the mind of Christ. They can know all about Christ, but unless they live out the principles, they have nothing more than benign orthodoxy. Teachers of Christian adults find that case studies furnish a helpful methodological climate in which theological reflection can germinate and grow. Teachers may write their own cases, but numerous professionally produced cases are distributed by the Association of Case Teaching.⁸

Another area that should be explored by teachers of adults in the church is teaching/learning styles theory. This theory argues that adults have different learning styles—characteristic strengths and preferences in the ways they take in and process information. Some learners have a proclivity toward learning visually, some aurally, others through reading and writing, and still others kinesthetically. David Kolb, addressing this issue, suggests that some adults are inclined to ask "why" questions, while others ask "what" questions, others "how" questions, and still

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others “what if” questions.⁹ When adult Bible class teachers constantly teach by using only their personal, preferred learning styles, they may not connect with a majority of the adults in their class. Using a variety of teaching/learning strategies increases the probability of engaging adults with various learning styles in the learning process.

Adult Class Leadership

Helping adults mature in faith and grow toward Christlikeness is more responsibility than one teacher can usually handle alone. Some congregations structure their adult classes to have two or more teachers. In addition to developing teachers of adults, congregation leaders may designate other roles. Several roles in addition to that of the teacher have emerged in recent years. One responsibility is that of the class host(s)/hostess(es). These individuals (often a couple) welcome class members, introduce guests, make announcements, and plan fellowship gatherings. Hosts/hostesses may also assign class members to bring refreshments or to carry out other tasks of group life. Producing a class newsletter, organizing small groups to meet outside of class times, and following up on delinquent class members are additional tasks that the hosts/hostesses may facilitate.¹⁰

Some classes also designate an individual to be outreach leader. The most obvious place to begin building an adult class is with those adults who have visited the class. An outreach leader identifies class guests each week and coordinates follow-up visits. A good principle is “sooner is better.” Wayne Haston reports on a recent study that indicates that if a class member visits in the home of a first-time attender within thirty-six hours (before Monday evening), there is an 80 percent likelihood that the person will return the next Sunday.¹¹

A team of leaders (teachers, hosts/hostesses, outreach leaders) in an adult class helps prevent teacher burnout and distributes the responsibilities to spiritually gifted class members. Hosts/hostesses and outreach leaders are as essential to developing healthy adult classes as are teachers. When all roles are being carried out well, adult classes grow spiritually, biblically, numerically, and socially.

Conclusion

Teaching children, youth, and adults is central to the Lord’s plan for people to grow and mature in Christlike ways. In addition to our current effective teaching of children, it is critical that congregations also provide healthy learning experiences for adults of all ages. Congregational leaders demonstrate wisdom when they prayerfully select as teachers of adults people of character who understand how adults learn and can work well with a team of class leaders.

Because the vision for Christian adult education is for every member to grow in Christlikeness, each church member must be supplied with spiritual nourishment and sustenance upon which to feast and grow in faith and holy living. If Christians’ spiritual diets consist mostly of felt needs, they may add bulk but be devoid of muscle and stamina. However, if they are served only the basics, they may become dissatisfied with the leanness of the meal. Content and application go hand in hand to produce maturing Christians. Congregational leaders must constantly call on teachers to encourage all of their adult learners to be biblically astute, culturally aware, and theologically reflective.

Developing teachers and leaders for effective adult education can best be accomplished with a team of class leaders who are spiritually gifted and passionate about their ministries. When a team of class leaders works together to encourage all adult learners to grow in Christlikeness, God will bless the efforts.

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Notes

¹Perry C. Downs writes extensively about the seminal value of teaching in the church in *Teaching for Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 27. Downs argues that spiritual for-

mation occurs daily as one encounters scripture, people, personal experiences, literature, spiritual disciplines, various contexts, and praxis.

²In the third volume of his trilogy, *By What Authority Do We Teach?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 34, Robert Pazmiño argues that God has always raised up leaders to teach, and for the church of the future to thrive, it has no choice but to continue as a biblical/theological teaching institution. In another of his books, *Principles and Practice of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 35–37, Pazmiño suggests that teaching serves as a ministry of connection because it provides perspective on the relationships between the various tasks of proclamation, community formation, service, advocacy, and worship.

³Gilbert A. Peterson, ed., *The Christian Education of Adults* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 7.

⁴Ralph G. Brockett and Roger Hiemstra, *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on Theory, Research, and Practice* (London: Rutledge, 1991). This volume provides readers with a good summary of current andragogical research in one source. The twenty-plus pages of references at the conclusion of the book are invaluable.

⁵Rick Yount, “The Goal of Christian Teaching: Christlikeness,” in *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, ed. Daryl Eldridge (Nashville: Broadman, 1995), 141.

⁶Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,

1998). This volume, along with an earlier writing of Palmer’s, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education*, provides rich insights into the character, heart, and spiritual passions of the teacher.

⁷Patricia O’Connell Killen and John DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroads, 1995), viii. The Whiteheads also furnish a model of theological reflection that expands on the concept of a three-legged stool (scripture, experience, social sciences) in James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995).

⁸The Association of Case Teaching produces an annual journal, which contains numerous cases. Previously published copies of the *Journal for Case Teaching* may be secured from the Association along with books containing case studies. The address is ACT, P.O. Box 243, Simsbury, CT 06070.

⁹Richard M. Felder, “Matters of Style,” *ASEE Prism* 6, no. 10 (1996): 18–23. In conducting research in teaching/learning style theory, I identified more than 250 articles written between 1995 and 1998.

¹⁰Mary E. Hughes and Diane J. Hymans, “Exploring Opportunities for Adult Learning,” in *Lifelong Learning: A Guide to Adult Education in the Church*, ed. Rebecca Grothe (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997), 148–61.

¹¹Wayne Haston, *Adult Sunday School Ministry: The Dynamics of Successful Classes* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway, 1993), 179.