

PRACTICAL HELPS FOR CHRISTIAN MINISTRY:

Introduction

Herein we will consider the goals of the Christian education program for the local church. We will seek to focus on the peculiar needs of the body at chronological and spiritual levels of maturity. The number or divisions of “classes” for Sunday school will not be addressed since that will vary widely based on the size of a congregation and the resources that each church can devote to programs.

In part one of this paper we will consider the general divisions of (1) child, (2) youth, and (3) adult ministries, with an additional consideration of the special needs of (4) senior adults.

In part two of this paper we will take note of three methods of Bible study that a church may consider using in support of their goals for Christian education.

Part I: Goals

Goals for Ministry to Children

The general age category we will consider here is the wide expanse from birth to approximately age twelve. Although there are many sub-stages within this grouping, the whole can be considered unified by their dependency upon parents for care, direction and the majority of their interaction. For this group we need to answer questions that are formed beginning with the word “what”.

“What is the Bible?” : From babes in arms children need to learn that the Bible is God’s Holy Word. We should consistently teach and model respect for the Bible as the authority for our lives, the source of our wisdom, and a gift directly from God. When teaching bible stories or telling a child what God has said the Christian educator should have a copy of the Scriptures at hand and refer to it often.

“What does God say?” : Children who know that the Bible is God’s word then need to know what is contained in it. We are commanded in Deut. 6:7-8 to be teaching God’s law to children constantly. Lessons and concepts from the Bible can be both taught and modeled. Proverbs 22:6 lets us know that we are responsible to train them in the way they should go, not just simply tell them the story of what has happened in the past. Simple storytelling should be avoided if entertainment is the goal. The local church is not for entertaining children while

adults are “doing something important.” Children’s ministries should be considered among the most important of any in the local church.

“What must I do to be saved?” : Statistically, people are most likely to respond to the Gospel when they are children¹. It should be our goal to present the plan of salvation clearly and frequently, and to check that each child understands the message and their personal responsibility toward it. Our chief goal in all Christian education ministries should be to carry out the Great Commission² in our Jerusalem, which includes the unsaved in our own churches.

“What does a Christian do?” : At the first stages of conversion children should learn the need for the Christian to worship God, pray daily and fellowship with believers. Reading and memorizing Scripture with the goal of hiding His Word in their hearts (Psalms 119:11) is also important. Successful children’s ministries such as Awana³ and CEF’s Good News Clubs⁴ make Scripture memory a fun priority of every session.

“What does the Bible say?” : Bible study and life application for young Christians can commence in grade school and become part of all stages of life and education to follow. Topical Bible studies on prayer, honesty, peer pressure, the life of Christ, or Biblical creation can be geared to the level of understanding and the attention span of children as young as 3 or 4 years. On the topic of creation, for instance, books like *A is For Adam*⁵ and *D is for Dinosaur*⁶ can be used to see that preschoolers have solid biblical teaching on the subject before their first encounters with evolution in primary school.

“What about my friends?” : Children naturally love and care for their family, friends, and acquaintances. Telling others about Jesus and the need of each person to be saved will be second nature if we teach and model soul winning to them.

A final word: plan well and give this age group the best that your church has to offer, remembering Christ’s admonition in Matthew 18:5-6; that if you cause one of these little ones to stumble it would be better that you went swimming in the ocean with a millstone around your neck than have to stand and answer for it!

¹ Child Evangelism Fellowship study conducted in USA, 2000: 34% of children, 4% of youth, and 6% of adults will respond to the Gospel clearly presented.

² Matt. 28:19-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8.

³ Awana International, One East Bode Rd, Streamwood, IL 60107-6658, (630) 213-2000

⁴ Child Evangelism Fellowship Inc., PO Box 348, Warrenton, MO, 63383 / (636)-456-4321

⁵ *A is for Adam*, Ken and Mally Ham, Word Publishing; ISBN: 0890512078; (July 1996)

⁶ *D is for Dinosaur*, by Ken and Mally Ham, Publisher Unknown; ISBN: 0890511934; (June 1991)

Goals for Ministry to Youth

For the teen years, the program may be considered as continuing to build on the childhood program, but must take into account new converts. Personal discipleship must be available for teens that are newly saved. Evangelistic outreach will be harder in this age group and may require special programs to achieve. In general, however, the youth message should have the goal of answering questions starting with the word “why?”

“Why do I have to go to church?” : The importance of regular worship and making it relevant to teens is a primary challenge. Motivating them to display and feel and grow in their faith is an important first step to discipling them further. Guard these sheep with a close and jealous eye.

“Why is the Bible so important?” : Although they are developing more capacity to think things through for themselves, many teens are burnt out on schooling and traditional learning. This age group desperately needs to learn doctrine and life application of Biblical truths, however, so the program may need to use alternative teaching methods. Object lessons, skits, competitive learning games and animated speakers are a few ideas that can hold their attention long enough to impress truth on them.

“Why should I hang out with Christians?” : The benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship can mean the difference of a life lived for Christ or a broken, aimless and heartbreaking period to come for teens. Have a goal of involving and being involved with your youth. Know them and know who they know.

“Why do I need to tell people about Jesus?” : Christian witness and personal evangelism can be very hard in these years. Peer pressure is intense. But peer pressure is a two way street and youth can be positively influenced by being part of organized outreach programs. Help your youth discover if they have gifts in this area.

“Why can't I just do what I want?” : Service to others is learned by seeing and doing. Putting the desires and needs of others ahead of your own is unnatural and counter cultural. Only experience will convince teens that giving is more blessed than receiving. This may mean having an organized Christian service program in a larger church, or perhaps just a man or woman who will happily take along a teen as they visit in a nursing home or do yard work for an elderly person in the community.

Teens will test every limit they find, including how far they can press their leaders. Make sure your youth leaders are ready to be pressured, and that they know how to return the pressure to challenge teens toward success.

Goals for Adult Ministries

Men's class, women's class, singles, parents with youngsters, parents of teens, empty nesters: Christians come in many flavors. Although the adult group is the most diverse in both maturity level and needs, they share the common need to hear answers to questions of "how?"

"How do I live daily for God?" : Both the new and the mature Christians struggle with personal purity and yieldedness to God's will in their lives. Learning to put on the mind of Christ while keeping a busy home or meeting the challenges of the working world requires continual learning and relearning of basic truths and methods of applying them.

"How do I grow in grace and knowledge of God?" : The grace to face the constant challenges of life, to pull through loss and grief, to stand strong for your faith and even to educate your children. Sunday school won't always be personal enough for these topics. We must be ready for small class and individual teaching in this group at any time. And we need to use systematic methods of Bible study to equip them with the whole counsel of God.

"How do I reach others for Christ?" : Often the adults are ready to leave the evangelism to the "professionals" when this is actually the most important time in their lives for them to be winning the lost, from an accountability stand point. Teach several methods of personal evangelism so that everyone understands that evangelism must be carried out at every opportunity, not just from behind the pulpit.

"How do I fit into the ministries of the church?" : Training for Christian service cannot be neglected. Before setting our people loose in the ministries of the church they must be equipped for their service. Too often we put the spiritual lives of the young in the hands of adults whose only training in leading or teaching has come from the world.

"How do I recognize my spiritual gifts?" : Their gifts, their calling, the will of God for their lives; most adults in the church are still stumbling around seeking answers in these areas, as if answers will fall from the sky. Time and personal interaction need to be invested to help our people fulfill their proper role in the body, by obeying the simplest commands of Scripture.

"How do I overcome pain and grief?" : Counseling in time of acute need is a responsibility too heavy to be left unplanned. Many should learn to understand the needs and several trained to come along side.

“How can I raise Godly children?” : I have seen too much conflict, confusion and contradiction on this subject not to consider parenting a priority need in Christian education. We can never truly have all of the answers for every situation, but no Christian parent should be ignorant of their responsibility before God and the body to raise Godly children.

Typical adult Sunday school programs are planned occasionally and put on autopilot for years at a time. Find a way to make variety and change part of the plan! Don't let your adult Sunday school become an extension of your morning worship service, or vice versa.

Special Goals for Senior Adult Ministries

Though most of what we have covered in the previous section applies to these folks as well, our senior saints need to be especially challenged and encouraged to be an integral, working and praying part of all church ministries. Though they may no longer ask questions like the younger folks do, they still have a lot to learn about what God wants them to be doing with their storehouse of knowledge and wisdom.

These folks are the saltiest salt in our congregations and we need to immerse them in the innermost parts of the body, not isolate them. We want their savor to rub off on others. We need to encourage them toward:

- Service – in every level of ministry
- Fellowship – with every age group in the church
- Stewardship – to ward off the “I deserve...” mentality of retirement
- Living their theology – and finishing well (even if they didn't start very well)

As a final note, don't call them “Senior Citizens,” “Retired” or “Older.” Call them S.A.L.T., your “Senior Addult Leadership Team!”

Part II: Methods

Bible Study Methods

In part one we have mentioned methods of Bible study without explaining the terms. This section briefly defines two well-accepted methods and then offers guidance for considering other methods.

Systematically by Book or Chapter – Study of a book at a time in a careful, contextual and complete method helps us to extract as much meaning as possible from the Word. Knowing when, to whom and under what conditions a piece was written may be the one best way to comprehend the overarching message and meaning that God has for us in the passage and how to approach the concepts and commands found there.

Systematically by Topic – Searching out and then studying everything that God has had to say on a certain subject is perhaps the best way of learning how to apply His Word in our own lives and helps us to understand the whole counsel of God one subject at a time. Whether it be prayer or witnessing or Christian education, we can best discern the origin and the final word on any subject by thorough, topical study.

Other Study Methods – Although there are a number of new and innovative methods circulating, be sure to test the source and motives behind any new Bible study ideas that come your way, just as you would test the content of any teaching material before using it in your church. A Warning about the Iona method⁷ – This method involves separate individual study and coming together for open group comment. It can be an informative study method for mature Christians who have a lot of sound Bible knowledge, but is inappropriate, and may be dangerous, for use among newer or untrained believers who wind up sharing their ignorance rather than enlightening each other. In short, be sure that your methods are as carefully selected and reviewed as are your materials.

⁷ From “Lectionary Studies”, see Bibliography.

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