

Three Options for Curriculum Planning

Many churches look for a structure or plan on which to build their adult curriculum. A carefully crafted plan provides a balance of topics and addresses multiple needs, not just presenting the latest, “hot” topic. For smaller churches, selecting topics may be easier because most of the participants are known. In mid-sized and larger churches, a straightforward plan that makes clear the scope of the adult teaching/learning opportunities will be helpful. In every church, it is essential to identify the purpose for the class and its desired outcomes.

Note that no matter which option a church chooses, the plans are ultimately developed to draw us individually and collectively into a deeper relationship with Christ. The renewing of our minds and the transformation of our lives, and our actions, only occurs when we are attentive to the Spirit in the midst of our learning.

Option 1: A Topical Plan

The previous Planning Tool identified the following areas or topics that would be helpful to include in a church’s curriculum plan. This resource suggested that, within three years, the adult Sunday school or small group experience should contain topics or studies distributed among the following three components:

1. Biblical Studies
 - a. Old Testament and New Testament survey
 - b. Biblical book studies
2. Formational Christian Living
 - a. Evangelism and discipleship
 - b. Marriage and the family
 - c. Christians in the workplace
 - d. Personal devotional life
3. Church Related Subjects
 - a. Ethical issues
 - b. Christian Doctrine
 - c. Church history
 - d. Covenant theology and history

The structure for the learning process could include the Sunday school, small group ministries, special series, etc.

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Sample Three-Year Ministry Plan for Adults - Possible topics

Year 1

1. New Testament survey
2. Old Testament subjects
3. Discipleship
4. Electives
 - Bible backgrounds/cultural context
 - Present-day religious movements/world religions
 - Family matters/marriage enrichment/single adult ministry studies
 - Recovery/grief studies
 - Diversity
 - The Lord's Prayer
 - Prayer

Year 2

1. Old Testament survey
2. New Testament subjects
3. Evangelism
4. Electives
 - Christianity in the market place
 - The devotional life and spiritual disciplines
 - Managing our resources
 - Family matters/parenting
 - Personal wellness
 - Covenant history
 - Diversity

Year 3

1. Theological/historical studies
2. Biblical subjects
3. Mission/serving (World Mission/cross-cultural mission)
4. Electives
 - Spiritual direction
 - Worship
 - How relationships work in community
 - The Apostles' Creed
 - Revelation and the future
 - Stewardship
 - Scripture reading and memorization
 - Diversity

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Option 2: A Plan Based on Your Church Vision/Mission/Purpose

The second option invites planning team members to take a step back and begin the planning process by exploring the vision/mission/purpose of their church. In this approach, the team discusses the vision/mission/purpose and identifies the areas where adults in the church need to mature in order to “live” this mission. During the discussion, team members dissect the statement and analyze the parts. If the statement includes the Bible, team members ask, “What do adults need to know and experience in order to make the Bible a part of their life?” If it includes mission, they ask, “What do adults need to know and experience in order to make mission a part of their life?” If it includes outreach, they ask, “What do adults need to know and experience in order to make outreach a part of their life?” The team asks a similar question for each area of the statement. Next, the team identifies the variety of ways that the answers to these questions can be addressed through teaching/learning experiences. The best learning environment may not be Sunday morning. It may be a weekend seminar or a study retreat or any of a number of settings. This option for curriculum planning takes the church’s vision/mission/purpose seriously and intentionally structures the teaching/learning settings to support and implement it.

The Sunday school ministry at one church in Chicago had lost its luster, and discussion developed regarding the next steps. Three of the church priorities were building community, addressing the needs of the neighborhood and encouraging Christian formation. Because this is a newer church with many single adults, the committee decided to provide lunch once a month following worship and include discussing a topic specifically related to the mission of the church. The meal is basic, the fellowship is authentic, and the learning is practical. So far the topics have included a session on spiritual direction, homelessness in the local area, and understanding Advent. This effort is just beginning, but it seeks to help this church bring life to its vision/mission.

In order to illustrate this option we will use, as a sample vision statement, the Discipleship/Confirmation Building Block on the purpose of the church.

The statement

The purpose of the church is to glorify God, celebrate new life in Christ, build up one another in faith and love, proclaim and teach the gospel everywhere, and care for the needs of the world.

The following statements demonstrate how a planning team can move from discussing the vision/mission/purpose statement to identifying possible topics to bring those statements to life.

1. Identify the main ideas and define each in terms of personal discipleship. The following example demonstrates how a vision statement can be reworked to define a disciple for a church.

A disciple:

Glorifies God (personal and congregational worship)

Celebrates new life in Christ (evangelism, Grow Commitment Card, life-long learning)

Builds up one another in faith and love (relationships, spiritual gifts, service within the church, accountability)

Proclaims and teaches the gospel everywhere (hear, learn, and live God’s word)

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Cares for the needs of the world (Where is God's love needed in our community and world?)

- Clarify each topic by stating possible outcomes for each part of the definition (column 2) and then brainstorms a list of possible classes or topics to teach (column 3).

A disciple:	Possible outcomes	Possible classes
Glorifies God	Practices personal and congregational worship	Seeing God in daily life Spiritual disciplines How we worship
Celebrates the new life in Christ	Shares story of faith, sets Grow Commitment goals	Telling our faith stories Using the Grow Commitment Card (6 week study) Friendship evangelism
Builds up one another in faith and love	Knows and uses spiritual gifts, nurtures relationships with neighbors, visitors, peers, and spiritual companions	Spiritual gift study Ministry apprenticeship Exploring diversity
Hears, learns, and lives God's word (<i>note change from church to individual</i>)	Commitment to life-long learning	Old Testament overview New Testament overview Uses a Bible reading plan Gospel formational study Epistle formational study Stewardship The Bible: from printed words to daily life
Cares for the needs of the world	Seeks to represent Christ to those outside the church	Where is God's love needed in our community and world? Ministry apprenticeship Encountering world mission Encountering local mission

- Review the list of classes or topics and select the ones that will best help you make and deepen disciples.

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4. Consider each class or learning experience and identify the model or environment that will best support learning related to this topic.

Classroom?

Retreat?

A small group?

Accountability partners?

Hands on learning by serving in a ministry?

5. Identify, recruit, and train possible teachers. Research and select curricular resources for each topic.
6. Create a marketing approach for your teaching/learning ministry. How will you get people to commit to the journey? Remember to focus on the desired outcomes. How will participation in these classes enhance the Christian life?

Option 3: GROW Planning

The Covenant's Department of Christian Formation has identified four areas where Christian formation is essential for developing disciples. Based on the acronym GROW, the four areas include God's word, Relationships, Obedient living, and Worship. For a detailed article on GROW, download the ID article, *GROW Intro*.

Topics for the teaching/learning ministries could be selected so that the ongoing curriculum plan includes or addresses each of the acronyms directly. Of course, there is overlap in these four areas. All of our teaching in the church is based on God's word, but the different acronyms provide a different direction or emphasis.

GROW in the teaching/learning ministry

We often associate G (God's word) and O (Obedient living) with the church's teaching/learning ministry. We want to help people know and understand God's word, and we also want them to put that learning into practice.

With the mobile society in which we live, and the busy lifestyles of our congregations, the R (Relationships) becomes more crucial. By focusing on R, we give people a chance to share their stories and build connections within the congregation and also with God. By developing trusting relationships, participants feel more comfortable sharing their struggles with Obedient living and learning how others respond to similar challenges in their lives.

By focusing on W (Worship), we help people define and understand worship, and learn to participate in it more fully. The Christian Formation sample goal statement for Worship includes both worship individually in daily life and worship together in community. Teaching/learning related to both of these

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areas can be helpful for the Christian formation of new Christians, as well as the long-time church member.

Some sample strategies for building a curriculum plan around GROW

If all your adults meet in one class, consider offering a series of classes on each of the acronyms, between September and May. You might begin the fall with an emphasis on relationships to encourage group building and help those who may have recently found your church make connections. Late fall and early winter can be appropriate seasons to explore the G (God's word) or the O (Obedient living) topics. Of course, there is crossover between these topics. When we study obedient living we go to the Bible for guidance and when we study God's word we learn obedient living. Finally, during the spring offer a class on worship to help participants learn to join more effectively in the worship of your congregation or discover God in daily life. If your church provides a choice of learning opportunities each week simply add additional selections from your choice of topics.

Your team may like the GROW idea but feel that it should be weighted differently. It is possible to put more emphasis on certain elements and less emphasis on others. The point is to address, over the course of a year or two, all four of the GROW elements.

The following chart identifies some possible classes that could be incorporated into your curriculum plan based on GROW

GROW Guide	Sample Topics
God's word	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How to get more out of reading the Bible2. Old Testament overview3. New Testament overview4. A Gospel or Acts5. Old Testament book6. Learning to read the Bible with deeper understanding
Relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Sharing our stories. How did we hear God's invitation and find this church?2. Friendship evangelism3. Surviving life as a Christian – learning from the experiences of others4. Establishing spiritual friendships
Obedient Living	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The basics: systematic theology2. The hard sayings of Jesus3. Living Romans

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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Living James 5. Living 1 John 6. Issues: hunger, stewardship, homelessness, personal finance, etc. 7. Who is my neighbor? 8. Covenant Affirmations
Worship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How and why we worship 2. Learning to listen: scripture reading and the sermon 3. Spiritual disciplines 4. Prayer: in community and individually 5. Psalms, the Bible's worship book 6. Seeing God in all of life 7. Practicing the presence of God 8. Exploring spiritual temperaments and identifying yours

The acronym GROW can also provide a helpful model for teachers to consider as they construct their lesson plans. If we are to be the church, we need to include God's word and obedient living (living according to God's word) in each session. The relationship dimension is also notable, as we want people to find places to connect and belong in our churches. By taking the time to get acquainted and learn names and stories in our classes, we include the R dimension. Worship can also be a regular part of our settings as we acknowledge that God is a member of each class. By opening with prayer, we invite people to remember that God is present. Also, when we take time to share prayer requests and pray, we again acknowledge that God is the reason that we are together. Some groups also have gifted leaders who can add worship music to the class.

Conclusion

These three options are presented to challenge churches to become more intentional about the teaching/learning ministries of the church. Often churches fall into the trap of selecting topics based on what they think will interest people, or what someone is willing to teach. These three options provide some guidance to help churches identify what is important and organize their adult curriculum. Gary Parrett and Steve Kang, in their book, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, strongly suggest that churches need to be intentional about the content of the teaching/learning ministries or run the risk of future generations abandoning the faith because they do not know what the faith is all about.

To highlight this area of need, we close with this word from Parrett and Kang:

First it is critical that church leaders consider the matter of what they would deem essential content for the Christian education of church members, regular attendees, and inquirers. The question might

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be framed thus: “If someone were regularly attending our church for a three-year span, what content would we want to be sure was presented (in some significant way) to him or her?” In our experiences of consulting with congregations about such matters, we have found that it is the rare pastor who has even considered such a critical question, let alone attempted to answer it.

This first question really ought to be taken up by church leaders with serious, sober, and prayerful attention. In seeking to answer the question, we recommend that churches look to several sources for direction. First, primacy must be given to models and mandates of the Scriptures regarding what must be taught. Second, we ought to look to the wisdom of the church over the many centuries of its life and ministry. Third, we also do well to consider the efforts of contemporary churches that are obviously approaching the teaching task very seriously. (note: But we caution against merely copying the efforts of those churches that appear to be successful. It is easy to fall into such a trap, in part because many large churches mass-produce their materials and distribute them through impressive marketing campaigns. (Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), p. 140).