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Ways to Strengthen Adult Education

Create a culture that supports adult study

1. Communicate that learning is intrinsic to faith development. Lift up ongoing study, including adult education, as an essential function of any Christian community.
2. Reinforce the expectation of study participation from the pulpit and with new members.
3. Make Bible study a part of other church activities such as committee meetings and mission activities.
4. Use scripture meaningfully in worship. Don't assume your worshippers know the context of the passages read. Use sermons as an opportunity to teach the Bible.

Offer a variety of formats, schedules, and approaches

5. Experiment with a variety of times -- Sunday morning classes, weeknight groups, retreats, one-day events, and breakfast-hour or noon-time classes – depending on lifestyles in your congregation.
6. Consider scheduling some classes or small groups in homes or other community locations. Christian education doesn't happen only in church buildings.
7. Start new studies and groups often. Despite their best intentions, ongoing groups have a tendency to become cliquish. Newcomers are far more likely to feel comfortable joining something new.
8. Have as your goal a Bible study program that exposes church members to the entire biblical witness over time.
9. Recognize different learning styles among individuals and age groups. Older folks tend to be most comfortable with traditional classroom structures. Boomers are inclined to question authority and enjoy discussion. Younger persons are more accustomed to media and technology and prefer a fast-paced, informal style.
10. Make use of a variety of different approaches, including lectionary-based studies, topical studies, character studies, etc.
11. Incorporate different learning strategies, such as role playing, dramatization, guided meditation, even memorization.
12. Churches too small for a large number of groups can vary their approach by rotating different studies and curricula with groups.
13. Don't teach "about" the Bible in a way that doesn't allow people to encounter the texts for themselves. Encourage individual reading or make it part of the group's time together.
14. Encourage active, discussion-based learning. Break into small conversation groups frequently.
15. Allow for diversity in perspectives.
16. Encourage the use of a variety of different biblical translations. Those less experienced in Bible study may find it helpful to read from a paraphrase, such as *Good News for Modern Man* or *The Message*.



Meet people where they are

17. Acknowledge biblical illiteracy among many adult church-goers – even the well-educated – and strive for methods that straddle this paradox.
18. Recognize that some beginners will be turned off by “homework.” Use videos, in-class readings, dramatizations, or audio tapes as alternative ways of getting everyone “on the same page” and ready for discussion, all the while encouraging the habit of daily scripture reading.
19. Provide short-term classes for those who won’t commit to a long-term study or ongoing class, but make these short-term learning experiences “stepping stones” toward greater involvement.
20. Conduct “taster” classes for those who want to try out the experience before they commit to it. Select topics that will appeal to those new to Bible study.
21. Break an ongoing class into shorter, defined segments, each with a clearly identified focus. With each new segment, take the opportunity to publicize the topic and invite newcomers.
22. Teach stewardship of time to counteract “busyness.” Just as with financial stewardship, persons need to be encouraged to make Christian education a priority. Encourage “first fruits” commitments of time.
23. Be clear about expectations with regard to attendance, participation, and preparation.

Promote participation effectively

24. Link group study topics to sermon series and encourage participation from the pulpit.
25. Emphasize study during Lent. Select a topic or curriculum for church-wide study during this period and encourage all to take part. Tie the topic into preaching and worship.
26. Lift up study leaders and participants. Celebrate every time a new group starts or completes a study program. Use the newsletter, a photo board, or a dedication service in worship.
27. Ask class members to write a newsletter article or testify about the significance of their learning experiences.
28. Remember that personal invitations are usually the most effective way of getting someone involved in any activity.
29. Capitalize on the current popularity of book clubs and films by creating opportunities for those who enjoy these activities. Check out “Reel Time” from Cokesbury.

Foster strong leadership

30. Recruit leaders as the first step toward forming groups. Groups will often form around a gifted leader.
31. Stress the group leader’s role as facilitator, rather than teacher. Setting up one person as “the expert” creates a poor group dynamic and discourages new people from stepping into leadership. Thinking of group leaders as facilitators allows Scripture and the Holy Spirit to do the teaching.
32. Expect your pastor to model the importance of ongoing adult education by leading and participating in study, but don’t reinforce the notion that only the ordained can lead study groups.
33. Take advantage of the leader training opportunities provided in conjunction with many popular study curricula.
34. Provide orientation and ongoing support for group leaders.



35. Train leaders in group process so they can keep their groups on track, being sensitive to the need to keep more outspoken participants in check and draw out the more reserved using phrases like, "Let's hear from some of the others," or "You look like you have something to say."
36. Emphasize the importance of leader preparation, especially mapping out discussion questions in advance.
37. Encourage team leadership. Experienced leaders should invite a newer person to pair with them in leading groups to develop the less experienced leader.
38. Rotate the leadership responsibility within a group so that all participants get experience leading sessions.
39. Know that Sunday School classes and small groups are one of the best places to develop lay leaders and lay relationships that strengthen the church.

Use resources effectively

40. Stay abreast of new resources, including those available from other denominations or traditions and the secular press.
41. Don't be afraid to introduce ideas and resources from a variety of theological perspectives. Trust the discernment abilities of individuals and the group.
42. Use workbook-style studies creatively. Nothing is more boring than a lesson read straight out of a leader's manual. Find ways to make pre-packaged lesson plans come alive.
43. Use videos to bring expert perspectives to bear and to get everyone "on the same page" for discussion. But avoid class sessions that are no more than viewing a video, or participants will soon wonder why they shouldn't stay home and watch their own TV.
44. Create a resource center with reference materials, maps, and other items to support your leaders and participants.
45. Don't allow your church library to become a museum. Update the collection. Offer books and resources linked to sermon topics and congregational study themes.
46. Consider a book sales kiosk and stock it with things you'd like your congregants to be reading. Many busy people would rather buy a book than worry about due dates and library fines.

Stress spiritual formation

47. Remember, the goal is formation, not information. Every class should be deliberate in helping members accept God's grace, grow in faith, deepen their relationship to the Christian community, and answer Christ's call to discipleship.
48. Include prayer as part of every study session and encourage group members to pray for one another daily.
49. Encourage a covenantal relationship within study groups.
50. Nurture a sense of Christian community and connectedness within groups. A Sunday School class or small group can be a "home" for individuals within a larger church.



Other Resources

Bruce, Barbara. *Seven Ways to Teach Bible to Adults: Using our Multiple Intelligences to Build Faith*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

Murray, Dick. *Teaching the Bible to Adults and Children*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

Roncace, Mark. *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*. Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2005.

Rusbult, Richard E. *Basic Teacher Skills: Handbook for Church School Teachers*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997.

What Every Teacher Needs to Know. Nashville: Discipleship Resources. 2002. (a series of ten booklets on The Bible, The United Methodist Church, The Classroom Environment, Theology, Teaching, People, Faith Language, Curriculum, Living the Faith, and Christian Heritage.)

Leader in Christian Education. A quarterly magazine available by subscription from Cokesbury.

Sunday School -- It's for Life at www.sundayschool.cokesbury.com.

For additional resources and to subscribe to the Lewis Center's free biweekly online newsletter, *Leading Ideas*, go to <http://www.churchleadership.com>.

