

## SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW TO DO A CURRICULUM EVALUATION

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Before beginning a curriculum evaluation, the first important question to answer is:

***When we reach the end of the program year, what do we want to see in the lives of the children entrusted to our care?***

And, to paraphrase the Scriptures, “and the second is like unto it:”

***When our children graduate from this program, what kind of Christians do we want to have formed?***

These questions are not always something we can answer when beginning our search – sometimes looking at curricula helps us to know better what we are seeking. And we need to be clear as we move toward adopting a curriculum that we will need some means of evaluating how successful we have been. But if we don’t have some idea of what our goals are when we begin, then curriculum selection is a confusing and laborious process that takes lots of time and resolves nothing in the end. So, as we design our evaluation process for curriculum selection, these two questions and their tentative at least answers need to be at the top of the page.

**These questions need discussion to be answered. We need to consult with Pastors, parents, teachers, and students as appropriate. Open discussion will help us arrive at consensus and give us greater clarity.** Once we have established the place from which to begin, the next question we want to ask is:

***What are our educational goals?***

Question to ask to get to the answer include factoring in such things as:

- Is it important our children be exposed to a wide variety of Bible stories during the year or do we want to spend time working in depth with one story or collection of stories?
- Do we have “benchmarks” we want to establish along the way such as learning the 10 Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, etc.?
- What is the physical space like? Do we have the space to use materials that require a “station” approach?
- Who are our available volunteers? What are their preferred ways of teaching? Are there other volunteers who might be drawn to the program if another teaching pedagogy were adopted?
- Take the budget into account. What can be reasonably afforded? Is it possible to begin with some materials and add on to them each year? Are there folks within

the congregation who might be willing to help make materials, create workstations, props, etc?

After we have answers to these questions, we then begin to search for curricula that we think might meet our needs. There are additional considerations to take into account as we move into this part of the process:

- Is the curriculum produced by or sold through Cokesbury or a denomination with which we have common theological understandings?
- What is the theological stance of the materials?
- Is the biblical content faithful to and consistent with the Scriptures?
- Is the artwork faithful to Scripture (i.e. is Jesus pictured as blonde and blue-eyed? If he is, you might want to really examine the materials for bias and unspoken assumptions)?
- Is there balance between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament?
- Is the curriculum lectionary- based (covers the same stories as those being read in the worship service)?
- Are the materials inclusive when it comes to race, economic status, gender and disabilities?
- Are the lessons teacher-friendly and easy to use?
- How much teacher prep time is involved?
- Can both new and experienced teachers use the materials?
- What materials are actually included in the purchase of the curriculum materials? Must additional items be purchased separately?
- Are the materials age-appropriate (this is an extremely important issue as children are maturing faster than most developmental models used by curriculum designers) and attractive?
- Are the materials effective? Will children take away the intended message of the lesson?
- Is the program geared for large or small group numbers? Can it be adapted?
  - Games meant for more than 10 children?
  - Are crafts complicated and require additional helpers?
  - Will the lessons work with multi-aged groups?
- Are take-home materials included and is there a parent component for use in the home?
- Can this curriculum be used more than once? Or in settings other than the standard classroom (i.e. – could it be used as a family Advent/Lent program? Or could it be presented as a Children’s Moment?)
- What is the physical quality of the product? Will materials last as long as we need them to and can take-home materials, etc. be purchased each year if re-using the curriculum in subsequent years?
- Is there a service component that meets the mission focus of the larger congregation?
- Is there a worship component for the classroom included?

Here are some categories and terms used in curricula descriptions that are helpful to know:

*Scope and Sequence:* In religious curricula, this tends to mean the traditional format of a set lesson plan following Biblical stories sequentially with a specific message to be taken away from the daily lesson. Often times the sequence covers a multi-year plan, so that by the graduation from Church School, children have been exposed to a set canon of stories. Cokesbury's *Rock Solid* materials fit this definition. Advantages to this style include a wide exposure to the biblical narrative and some orderly context for presentation. But if a child misses a week or season, whole portions of the narrative are missed and gaps exist in the larger Christian Story. And some units can be deadly – weeks can be spent on the “vine and the branches” images or on the minor prophets.

*Lectionary-Based:* This is a variation on scope and sequence. The “sequence” followed is the readings appointed by the Church for reading and preaching at worship. These are found in the Revised Common Lectionary used by many UM congregations (as well as in denomination-specific lectionaries), in a three-year reading cycle. Each lesson includes the Old Testament, New Testament and Gospel reading of the day. Advantages of this style of curricula are that parents and children hear the same stories each Sunday and so there is a foundation for discussing and living out the Scripture at home. Some of the disadvantages are that many sections of the Old Testament are left out of the RCL and the lesson-plan focus tends to be the Gospel lesson of the day. Both the Episcopal and Lutheran Church's publishing houses have RCL-base curricula available. Check out <http://www.morehouseeducation.org/living-the-good-news/lectionary-based-curriculum.php> for an example.

*Rotation:* This is a fairly new model of Church School developed largely by the Presbyterian Church in the 1990's. It takes perhaps four or five biblical stories to explore over the course of the year. Each story is presented over a number of weeks through a variety of different learning media presented in different rooms or stations. The teacher teaches the same story with the same materials each week as different classes move through their room. For example, if we were working with the story of the Exodus, several teachers would be presenting this story in different rooms with a different media focus – one would center around music, one around art, another around drama, perhaps one would be audio-visual, one might make unleavened bread, etc. Each class spends one Sunday in each classroom experiencing the story in a variety of sensory ways. Advantages of this type of curricula are that it meets a variety of learning needs and helps the children experience the biblical narrative in an embodied way. They KNOW the story in their souls at the end of the unit. Teachers can work with their preferred ways of teaching and lots of creativity is encouraged. Because a teacher repeats the lesson each week in their room or at their station, it is easier for teacher prep and planning. The downside is that this form takes a great deal of planning and coordination to plan each year and by its nature, only a limited number of stories can be covered. More information can be found at: <http://www.rotation.org/>

*Montessori:* Again, this is a newer pedagogy for Christian formation that comes out of the secular Montessori educational philosophy. Children are encouraged to hear, touch, experience and literally “play” with the biblical stories. Children hear and see the lesson of the day presented through manipulatives and then are encouraged to “respond” to the story at stations that offer multi-media and sensory approaches – art, music, drama, writing, cooking, etc. are all methods of response. Advantages are that children experience the biblical story in embodied ways and are drawn into the mystery, language and wondering of faith. But teachers have to be trained to present the stories in such a way that children are invited to wonder rather than to take away a predetermined understanding of what the story means. These curricula tend to be either overly focused on the New Testament or the Old Testament. For an example, check out:

<http://www.companionsinchrist.org/WOC/curriculum.html>  
<http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/newsite/Main.php>.

One thing to remember: **THERE IS NO ONE PERFECT CURRICULUM!!!** Each has strengths and weaknesses and not all needs can be met in one curriculum. The challenge is to partner with the Holy Spirit to see where our excitement is engaged and how we can best share the faith we love with the next generation of Christians.

The above are simply some thoughts to help you, your education commission, your teachers and your pastors started. As you talk together, more ideas, concerns and questions will arise. There will be much excitement and some folks who say, “But we have never done it this way!” Follow the Holy Spirit’s direction and see where it takes you!