



CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

We want our rooms to be places that our students—of any age—will want to return to. We want our students to feel that, *This is my place to belong, to learn, to find God.*

A FRIENDLY VOICE CALLS

Whoever enters the room first has control of the classroom, so be the first person to arrive. Being first in the room allows you to make certain that the room is ready for the students, to welcome the students, and to have learning opportunities or organized fellowship prepared in order to set the tone for the time to follow. For teenagers and adults, having doughnuts, juice or coffee, and a friendly presence available may be sufficient. If you are chronically late, recruit someone to arrive early to provide the needed presence.

Greet or acknowledge every person who enters the room. It is a lonely feeling to walk into a room and find that no one notices. It is easy for those who have already arrived to become complacent when deep in conversation with others, but it is important that every person be personally greeted or acknowledged in some positive way. Some classes have recruited greeters or tapped the natural hospitality of a class member to welcome people.

Everyone Knows My Name

To have someone call you by name acknowledges your value. As Christians we believe that God created each person as a special and unique being, a child of God. Names are important. Learn the name of each student in your class, and help the students learn one another's names. If the class is large, use nametags, table cards, or some other method of identifying people. Always have extra name-

tags on hand for when a visitor or new person attends. Remember that newcomers have a lot of names to learn, so don't expect them to remember everyone's names after just one introduction.

There Is a Place for Me at the Table

Just as everyone is welcomed to the Communion table, your classroom should always be a place where everyone who enters is welcomed. Be prepared for visitors, guests, and new members. Have enough Bibles, curriculum, supplies, songbooks, and chairs for those who may come. When someone who hasn't attended for a while returns, acknowledge that you have missed him or her, but do so without causing embarrassment.

Be prepared for students with special needs. Pay attention to accessibility issues, physical limitations, and learning styles.

I FEEL COMFORTABLE HERE

The room needs to fit the people who are in the class. Chairs, tables, and other furnishings should be the appropriate size for the class members.

Take into consideration the specific needs of class members, such as large-print curriculum for older adults or other people with impaired sight, an accessible room for people with physical limitations, and so forth. If some class members are experiencing declining hearing, make sure they are seated so that they can see everyone's mouths as they speak. Look for ways to minimize background noise.

Ensure that temperature, airflow, and lighting are conducive to learning.

God Is in This Safe Place

Be aware of safety issues related to the classroom facilities and the class. If you teach children, make sure that nearby entrances and exits are secure to assure that children do not leave unattended and cannot be taken by unapproved adults. If you teach older adults, make certain that chairs are sturdy and not too low. At least some of them should have arm rests. Check the locations of first-aid kits and the nearest telephone in case of an emergency.

Both in word and in action, you and the members of the class exemplify God's presence. The presence of God is acknowledged in planned and spontaneous ways. Plan the content of the class to be consistent with the values of the class. Plan for a mix of fellowship, learning, and worship designed to help class members grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

ANALYZE SPACE FOR LEARNING

Look around the room with your teaching team members and analyze what needs to happen to the facilities to make the room a place for learning. (See the **Environment Survey** below.) Identify any barriers to learning that exist in the room.

- Is there too much noise coming from nearby areas or from equipment?
- Is anything left in the room from a week-day activity that is distracting to the class?
- Is the temperature chronically too hot or too cold?

Sit down at the edge of the room. Think about your students.

- Who are they?
- What are their physical needs?
- Does this room meet those physical needs? Are the tables and chairs the right size and condition for your students?
- Is there space for three-year-olds to learn through play?
- Is there room for teenagers to stretch their growing bodies?

As you become more aware of how your classroom environment enhances the faith formation of your class members, you may want to experiment with new ways of arranging your

classroom space and creative uses of wall space. Think about ways that your classroom can extend beyond its walls. How can you use the hallways to create a mural that relates to the Bible stories being studied or to display student work?

Members of your class, or parents of members if you teach children, may be talented in creating visuals. Invite them to use their gifts; you do not have to do everything yourself. Some churches have a ministry group with the responsibility of creating hallway bulletin boards and visuals that relate to the season of the church year or to the subjects being studied in Sunday school.

It is important to pay attention to the physical classroom environment. However, as important as that is, paying attention to the needs of the students is imperative. Changing the bulletin board before Sunday school begins is not nearly as important as listening to the needs of the student who arrives early. Whenever it is necessary to make a decision between the classroom and the needs of a student, place the student first every time.

You and your students should feel God's presence in your classroom space. God is present when you arrive, while class is in session, and when you leave. As the teacher, it is your responsibility to assure that God is not pushed aside but is central to all that happens.

Time to Talk

For adults, set up a place in the room for a coffeepot, cups, sweet rolls, napkins, and nametags for the class to access as they enter the room. You may need a gathering space for before-class and after-class conversations.

Teenagers need a place to "hang out" as they arrive. This should be a place where they can be comfortable eating doughnuts and drinking juice or soft drinks, a place where they can visit with their friends. The space should be visible and safe.

Provide children times when they are doing an activity or having a snack to talk with one

another about school, pets, family activities, and so forth. Assure positive habits of conversation with friends by staying involved with the children but not dominating the conversation. Help parents know of classroom friendships. Occasionally plan a class experience away from the classroom, and include other adults for safety.

PLANNING FOR CHANGES

If you need to make changes to the physical space in your classroom in order to make optimal learning possible for your students, develop a plan and include the appropriate people in planning for the changes.

Talk with the Christian education director, the Sunday school superintendent, the age-level coordinator, or other people responsible for your congregation's Sunday school ministry. Explain the needs of your class and what changes you would like to make in the room. Solicit their help and advice. If the changes are cosmetic or minor, complete the changes as recommended by the Sunday school leader. If the changes are more major, ask the teacher to help you contact the Board of Trustees and make arrangements with them.

List several things that would enhance your classroom's physical space. Make a note next to each item as to whether it is something you could do yourself or something you would need the assistance of others to do. Who could provide assistance? Choose at least one item on the list and plan how you will implement it.

If you teach older children, teenagers, or adults, consider how they can be included in planning and fixing up their room. If the changes involve such things as painting the room and rearranging cabinetry and other furnishings, perhaps class members or parents of class members would come to a class work day to help complete the necessary tasks.

If other groups share the space during the week, including them in planning any changes may prevent long-term problems in sharing the space.

Keep the whole room in mind as you plan each class time.

- How can the space best be used?
- What limitations does the room bring?
- Is there anything else that you need to add or to remove?
- Would the class best be held in a different setting?
- If the response to either of the last two questions is yes, who else might need to be involved in any changes?

STEWARDSHIP OF SUPPLIES

Once your physical space is established, one of the first things to do in setting up a classroom is clean the space if it has not already been cleaned from the last class. Find out where unneeded supplies and curriculum are stored for others to share. Outdated student leaflets can be saved for children to use for cutting pictures later in the year. Adult student curriculum can be given to other classes or reused by home Bible-study groups.

Check the supply of newsprint and determine if refills are available. Sharpen pencils. Refill glue bottles. Throw away and replace dried-out markers, modeling dough, paint containers, and so forth. Gather appropriate containers for storing classroom supplies. Small, clear plastic containers with lids work great. Covered shoeboxes are also a good size.

Clear off shelves and clean out drawers. Clean shelf and drawer surfaces and replace supplies in an order that makes sense to you. Regularly straighten shelves and keep supplies stocked. Regularly return supplies to the common supply area as appropriate for your church so that others have access to them. (See the **Checklist of Supplies** below.)

Walls and Bulletin Boards

Look at the walls in your classroom. Is there a bulletin board that could be used as a learning tool for your classroom? Could parents to learn about their children in the nursery? Could young children's classrooms be a place for pictures of Jesus, of animals, of colors, of the children themselves? Elementary children's classrooms could be a place to post the children's creations, photos of the children, pictures related to the curriculum, or cross-

word puzzles and other activities that help the children learn more about the curriculum subjects. Youth and adult classrooms may be places to announce upcoming events and post photos from recent events.

Picture Files

Your church makes an investment in curriculum purchased for use each quarter. Particularly with children's curriculum, there is a packet of pictures, games, charts, and maps to use with the curriculum. If the pictures are kept and filed appropriately, they can be used repeatedly as teaching tools and as communication tools on bulletin boards and worship centers. Many of the pictures are appropriate for youth and adult classrooms, particularly those related to specific Bible stories or those that can be used for visual worship clues.

HAVE A WORSHIPFUL CLIMATE

Prayer is a form of communication with God. Make prayer a primary element of the curriculum plan. Be creative with prayer. Talk about prayer. Teach ways to pray. Invite class members to share prayer needs and to lead the class in prayer. Practice prayer as a regular part of class time. When you begin to teach, find out the prayer habits of the class. Encourage good habits already in place. As appropriate, teach new ways of prayer and new times for prayer. Be open to spontaneous prayer within the content of the curriculum or as conversation occurs.

Pray not just at the beginning and end of class but at other times during the class. Remember that all prayer does not need to be lengthy, flowery, or even expressed verbally. Prayer can be a physical movement, a song, a poem, a breath or a thought. Prayer can be silence in order to hear God speak to the heart. Most important is to communicate with God as a class and as individuals within the classroom environment.

Worship Centers

Set up a worship center to create a visual reminder of God's presence. Use a table or a small stand. A worship center can be as simple as a candle or can include a cross, a Bible, an offering plate, and something from nature.

If there is no space for a table, create a space on the wall. Use a special picture, hang a cross, use cloth to cover a bulletin board, use words or other symbols to create a focal point. Whatever is used, add new or fresh visual clues as reminders of God's presence. Change the colors to match the colors of the Christian seasons. Use symbols that relate to current curriculum or that remind the class of shared experiences with God.

Classroom Rituals

Classroom rituals are an important part of any classroom. Whatever the class members' ages, from the youngest of children to the oldest of adults, ritual is important in reminding them of the presence of God. A ritual is something that almost always occurs and that can be relied upon to happen. It might be reciting the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of class, holding hands and reciting a familiar blessing at the end of class, the order in which everything happens from the beginning of class time to the end, or the words you use to greet students as they arrive. Rituals should reflect what is important to the class.

Do you have a worship center in your classroom? How long has it been since you updated it? What are your class rituals? How do these rituals help class members grow in faith? Are there some rituals that need to be changed?

New rituals bring freshness. Old rituals provide comfort. Do not let rituals become stagnant. Sometimes it is good to replace a ritual with a new one, perhaps at the start of a new curriculum or a new Christian season. Remember the importance of rituals, but do not let them become a burden. If you are already teaching a class, think about the rituals that have evolved. When starting to teach a class for the first time, inquire about the rituals that already exist in the class. When starting a new class, give some deliberate thought to the role of rituals. Introduce new experiences that might become rituals. Let the class help you evaluate them until the class has begun to form some rituals of their own.

RECORD HISTORY

Take photographs of the class often and post them in a place where the students can check for new photos. Take a photo of any new class members to include in the photo display. From time to time, include photos taken of class members when they were younger.

Periodically, take a class photo of those present on a particular Sunday. Write their names (and ages, if appropriate) and the date of the photo on the back. Frame the photo with fadeless construction paper. At the end of your teaching time, put class photos in the church archive.

For a new class (particularly a class for very young children, the first year of youth Sunday school, or a new adult class), begin a scrapbook including class photos and other mementos. Send the scrapbook with the class when a move occurs.

For all ages, provide space on the walls or on furnishings for class symbols that have meaning for this particular class. Display class creations that are relevant to the curriculum unit currently being studied. Or invite class members to share their artistic creations with the class for a special “traveling exhibit.” Do you have no place to display creative items? Build a kiosk using graduated sizes of boxes stacked on top of one another from largest up to smallest. Post your creative items on the sides of the kiosk.

MANAGING OR SHARING SPACE

It is a common experience in the church to share classroom space with others. A preschool Sunday school classroom may be used by the weekday early childhood program of the church. The youth classroom may become a fellowship room on Sunday evenings. The young-adult classroom may be used for mid-week Bible study. The parenting class may meet in the room used for receptions.

Sharing space can be a blessing, but it is not always an easy experience and may create a variety of challenges. The alternative, however, is to be poor stewards of the space God has given us by letting classrooms sit empty

except on Sunday mornings. As followers of Christ, we choose to share all our God-given gifts. For many Sunday school teachers, that means sharing our space with other groups throughout the week and praying for those “neighbors” and their own ministries, especially when co-habiting is inconvenient or irritating. Always strive to leave the room better than you found it as a gift to those who follow you.

List the other groups that use your classroom space. Who are the leaders or teachers of those groups? What could you do to make sharing space a better experience for them? What could they do to make sharing space a better experience for you? How could you initiate a conversation with the other groups that you share space with?

Allocate Storage Space

Everyone needs storage space. Evaluate space needed and space available. Advocate for additional storage if appropriate. Apportion storage space as fairly as possible. Label areas that are for common storage of supplies that will be shared. Label areas that are for storage by a specific group. Respect each other’s storage, and do not borrow anything without permission.

Carry In or Cover Up

Use a portable box to store and transport your curriculum and other supplies needed each Sunday. The box can be moved from place to place, such as home, so that supplies do not have to be left in the classroom. Select a sturdy box or plastic container with handles.

Sometimes groups must leave large items in the room, and those items become a distraction for your class. Maybe the quilters need to leave their current project out. Or the youth group has equipment too large to put in a closet. Or the choir leaves the handbells in the corner of your room. Try covering up the distractions with an old sheet during your class time. Even large, bulky items become “invisible” to the children when the items are covered. Ask a local hotel for old sheets they are no longer using.

Be a Good Neighbor

Set a time to meet with the leaders of the other groups who use the room. Get to know them. Decide together about room arrangement and rearrangements. Exchange phone numbers. Discuss specific needs for each group. Think creatively when planning how to meet the needs of each group. Be respectful of one another. If you are going to be gone, call the person who uses the room after you and alert him or her that a substitute will be using the room.

Occasionally leave a note of appreciation, a sealed bag with a cookie or piece of chocolate, a small craft item, a written prayer, or some other small gift for those who use the room after you. Mark it clearly with the name of the person it is for and leave it in an appropriate, visible place. Do not leave anything expensive.

Share Equipment, Share Walls

Moving things in and out for each meeting time is not easy for anyone. Make arrangements to share and to help each other, for example: "I'll leave my CD player out for others to use. You can leave nature projects for

my group to appreciate. We will each contribute markers to be available for all to share."

It is difficult to remove everything hung on the walls after each usage. Plan with your neighbors about wall space usage. Remember the other groups when leaving drawings, letters, and pictures on the wall. Change them often. Leave them as appropriate.

Moving Into Space Each Week

If you have to totally move in and out of your space each week, plan carefully. Select lightweight containers with lids and handles to hold your supplies and curriculum. Two medium-sized containers might be better than one large container, since a large container might become too heavy and cumbersome to carry. Carry one container in to class each week. Keep the second container at home for storage of supplies. Each week, transfer supplies needed for the current week into the container that you carry in. Select smaller containers to hold supplies like crayons and scissors inside the larger boxes. Use file folders to hold curriculum. Keep containers cleaned out and organized for easy usage. When a substitute teacher will be filling in for you, make plans to transfer the containers.



This pamphlet is prepared by the Faith Formation and Discipleship Groups at the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church and may be reprinted for use in the local church © 2010 GBOD.

For more information about the needs and requirements in specific ministry areas, see the leadership series *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation*, which includes

- * Christian Education
- * Children's Ministries
- * Youth Ministries
- * Adult Ministries
- * Family Ministries
- * Small Group Ministry

Go to www.cokesbury.com or call 1-800-672-1789. Please also visit our website www.gbod.org

ENVIRONMENT INVENTORY

First Time Visit to a Class

Imagine that you are visiting your class for the first time.

- What would you experience as you entered the room?
- Who would greet you? What would make you feel welcomed?
- What would make you feel like an outsider?

Coming in From the Parking Lot

Look at your entry with new eyes, as a visitor, from the parking lot to your classroom.

- What did you observe? Was your walk interesting?
- Were there signs to guide your way?
- Did you feel welcomed and wanted?
- Stand in the door of your classroom. What do you see? What draws your attention?

From a Young "Child's Eye" View

If you teach young children, get down on your knees or lie down on the floor. (If the floor is too dirty for you, it is also too dirty for them.)

- What do the children see at that height?
- Listen. What do you hear?
- Shut your eyes and take a deep breath. What do you smell?
- Pay attention to your skin. Is the temperature too hot, too cold, or too humid?

From an Older Child's View

If you teach older children, sit in the doorway in a chair that puts you at their height.

- Are the tables and chairs the correct height?
- Does the room invite the children to learn about Jesus, the Bible, and what it means to be a Christian, yet not overstimulate the senses?
- Is the temperature appropriate?
- Is there space for the large group to gather as well as for individual and small-group activities?
- Is the room clean yet energizing?

From a Young Person's View

If you teach youth, think about their needs.

- Are the chairs in your room appropriate for their growing bodies?
- Are there negative distractions in the room?
- Are there positive distractions in the room that help them focus on God, their faith, and relationships with others?
- Is there an area clean enough for food and drink distribution (an essential for youth)?
- Are there areas for conversation, play, and creativity? Does this room shout, "Youth belong here"?

From an Adult's View

If you teach adults, look around the space while thinking about the adults you teach.

1. Is the lighting good for reading?
2. Are the chairs comfortable without being too low?
3. Are tables and chairs free from splinters that snag good clothing?
4. Is the temperature of the room appropriate?
5. Does the room invite learning? Can people discuss, share, learn, and grow together?

CHECKLIST OF SUPPLIES

In a GENERAL Supply Area for All to Use

- Construction paper
- Shoeboxes
- Chalk
- Ribbon
- Yarn
- Watercolor paints
- Tempera paints
- Newsprint
- Paint shirts
- Paintbrushes
- Cardboard tubes
- Candles, matches
- Wrapping paper
- Baskets
- Lettering stencils, bulletin board letters and borders
- Rolls of white paper
- Large pieces of fabric for bulletin boards
- Seasonal puzzles
- Felt pieces and fabric scraps
- Empty margarine tubs and other containers
- Leftover miscellaneous craft supplies
- Filed posters and pictures from previous curriculum

In All Classrooms

- Bibles: Picture Bible for nursery and preschool; extra Bibles for all other age levels
- Paper
- Pencils, pencil sharpener
- Curriculum resources
- Antibacterial wipes
- First-aid kit
- Offering basket
- Attendance record
- Tape
- Thumbtacks, straight pins, or pushpins
- Washable felt-tip markers
- Crayons
- Stapler and staples

Added Items in Young Children's Classes

- Clean toys
- Extra diapers
- Tempera paints
- Glue

Added Items in Elementary Classes

- Hymnals
- Bible atlas
- Glue

Added Items in Youth and Adult Classes

- Hymnals
- Bible atlas
- Newsprint
- Bible dictionary
- Concordance