

Foundations

SHAPING THE MINISTRY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN YOUR CONGREGATION

The church of Jesus Christ cannot survive without the fundamental ministry of teaching. This document provides a starting point for building an intentional plan for teaching and learning in your congregation. It is written to encourage dialogue about how to implement this essential ministry with children, youth, and adults.

Your plan will include:

- *Learning Goals*
- *Settings*
- *Resources*
- *Teacher Identification and Development*
- *Evaluation*

Your plan should support the church's mission and purpose of Christian education.

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and by exemplifying Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world. *~The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, ¶121*

Through Christian education we invite people and communities of faith to be transformed as they are inspired and challenged to:

- *Know and experience God through Jesus Christ,*
- *Claim and live God's promises, and*
- *Grow and serve as Christian disciples.*

Think About It:

1. What do you want to happen in your church through your educational ministry?
2. How is the purpose of Christian education lived out in your church?
3. How does this purpose help fulfill the mission of the church as stated above?

Affirming our Ministry

We believe in God, revealed through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and creation, as witnessed to through the scripture, the worship, and the traditions of the faith, and we affirm that all of us, through our participation in Christian education, will:

- *Declare that God is present and active in the world;*
- *Know the content of the Bible and the Christian faith;*
- *Reflect on, discuss, witness to, and live our faith;*
- *Make decisions based on our Christian values;*
- *Discern and respond to the ministry to which God calls us;*
- *Grow in God's grace and in the gifts God has given us for ministry;*
- *Engage in a lifelong journey of learning and living the faith.*

The ministry of Christian education is holistic.

Christian education includes:

- How we think and learn;
- What we feel and experience; and
- How we put our faith into action.

When Christian education settings and the teachers who implement them are shaped by the affirmations stated above, lives will be transformed by the power of God's grace.

Transformation is a continual process of being converted or changed so that our fullest humanity can be realized. Our task is to provide numerous and diverse settings that inspire and challenge

Think About It:

1. How do these affirmations express important aspects of Christian education in your church?
2. What would you add or revise?
3. What does it look like when people and communities are transformed by God's grace?

people to open themselves to God's transforming grace.

- How does your educational ministry invite people to be disciples of Jesus Christ?
- Who does the inviting?
- Who is invited?

The miracle of transformation is, from beginning to end, a work of God's grace.

To be transformed is to be changed from one way of being to a new way of being.

Here is how Wesley described God's grace:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).

- **Prevenient grace** literally means “the grace that comes before.” Prevenient grace calls us into a relationship with God before we are even aware of God. It prepares us for the dawning awareness that God loves us so much that God seeks us out first.
- **Justifying grace** offers reconciliation, forgiveness of sin, freedom from the power and guilt of sin, and the possibility of new relationships with God and with one another.
- **Sanctifying grace** enables us to grow into the image of Christ and to live as a sign of God's reign among us. Sanctifying grace leads to inward and outward holiness.

Through Christian education, we create sacred spaces in which people can present themselves to God and where the ongoing work of transformation can take place.

God's grace prepares us to hear and to respond to the good news of Christ's saving love and to grow in holiness.

Through Christian education, we invite, inspire, and challenge people to profess their faith in Jesus Christ and to follow him in all that they do. As we are transformed by God's grace, we become more like Jesus and the world becomes a more loving and just place.

Know and Experience God

God is present and active in our everyday lives and in our world! Knowing God involves not only the transmission of information, which shapes our understanding, but it also involves experience, which shapes our very being and all that we do.

The Christian faith is concerned about our relationships with God through Jesus Christ, with one another, and with all of creation.

These relationships are informed by the on-going story of God's creative, redemptive, and sustaining action.

Scripture

Scripture is the primary source by which our Christian knowledge and experience are shaped.

The Old and New Testaments are "the Word of God," God's self-revelation. We encounter the living God in scripture.

Christian Tradition

Christian tradition can be understood as our "family history." It includes stories, symbols, rituals, language, and doctrine. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are called to explore the meaning of Christian tradition for our context.

As United Methodists, our experience of God is:

- Grounded in Scripture;
- Informed by Christian tradition;
- Enlivened in our experience; and
- Tested by reason.

Experience

God's acceptance of us in baptism is the starting point of our faith. As we experience God's gracious presence in our lives, we interpret all of our other experiences in light of our faith.

Reason

Reason enables us to hear and understand scripture and tradition, as well as to discover new possibilities for our future. A thinking faith enables us to be faithful to the past, relevant to the present, and viable for the future.

Claim and Live God's Promises

- God will be our God.
(Genesis 9:8-13)
- God promises to live in relationship with us.
(John 3:16)
- God will be with us forever.
(John 14:14-16)

In the decision to create us God promised to be our God and that we would be God's people forever.

Our relationship with God and with one another is grounded in God's relationship with us through Jesus Christ. God wants our full attention.

God's reign is one of justice, love, mercy, and equality. No one is to be excluded.

Teaching the Promises of God

Teachers are called to create a space where group members can come to know God and God's claims on their lives. As teachers, we expect God to be at work in our lives, in the lives of our group members, and in our teaching and learning.

We must teach that God's grace is not only freely given, but also that God's grace has transforming power in our lives. One of the ways we teach is through stories, including biblical stories, personal stories, and congregational stories. As we reflect on these stories, we explore how the promises of God's loving presence are still available to us.

Think About It:

1. What do you understand to be the nature of God's promises?
2. How does your congregation teach the promises of God?
3. Where do you see evidence of God's reign in your church and/or community?

Grow and Serve as Christian Disciples

Growth as a disciple of Jesus Christ is a lifelong process of having our lives conformed to the life of Christ. We seek to become mature Christians, filled with the fruit of righteousness, love, joy, and peace.

Early Methodists described this process of spiritual growth and maturation as:

- Sanctification;
- Going on to perfection; and
- Holiness of heart and life.

Loving God and one's neighbors is the highest obligation of the sanctified life.

God does not call us to a way of believing as isolated individuals, but rather to a way of life as a community. The community of faith gathers for worship, fellowship, study, support, and accountability. The community of faith scatters to witness and to serve.

God is the source of our growth. We access that source when we practice spiritual disciplines, or "means of grace" as described by John Wesley.

A Wesleyan Way of Living

1. Do no harm.
2. Do good.
3. Stay in love with God.

No one is ever too old, too pure, too holy, or too righteous to continue growing into Christ.

As individuals and in community, we learn to love God and serve our neighbors through:

- Prayer;
- Study of scripture;
- Worship;
- Participation in the sacraments;
- Fasting;
- Christian conversation; and
- Responding to the needs of others, particularly the poor.

Our service to God is rooted in Jesus' commandments to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "to love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). These commandments shape our identity and purpose as followers of Jesus Christ.

Through our service we are co-workers with God. We join in God's transforming work, and we witness to God's grace in our own lives. Service is our grateful response to our experience of abundant life in Jesus Christ.

Think About It:

1. What does your church teach about the relation between faith and service?
2. How do you help group members identify and use their spiritual gifts in service?
3. How can your congregation develop a culture of giving and self-sacrifice (rather than viewing service as an activity)?

The Nuts and Bolts of Planning

When we plan, we must address three fundamental aspects of Christian education: settings; curriculum; and teachers and small group leaders.

Settings

Sunday school classes quickly come to mind when we think about Christian education. However, many congregations are finding that week-day small groups provide the time and opportunity for exploring Christian faith and discipleship. Settings may be on-going or short-term. They can take place in church buildings, in group members' homes, in the community, or in retreat settings. An effective ministry of Christian education will offer many places where teaching and learning can occur.

Curriculum

Broadly defined, curriculum is the design or plan for Christian education in the congregation. Curriculum resources are particular materials selected to achieve the learning goals of your plan.

Curriculum resources may be age-graded materials for learning the Bible or some aspect of the Christian faith, life experiences, community issues, books, music, and/or movies.

When choosing curriculum resources, ask yourself:

- How appropriate are the suggested activities for this particular age group?
- Will group members with different learning styles be engaged?
- Do these materials reflect our congregation's theology? Will these materials strengthen our congregational identity and purpose?
- How can this resource help group members make connections between what they believe and how they live?
- How will this resource challenge group members to continue growing in faith and living as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Teachers

Research indicates that teachers are the key ingredient to an effective learning environment.

When identifying teachers, consider people who:

- Continue to learn and grow in their faith;
- Enjoy being with others;
- Understand how people learn;
- Listen deeply to God and to others;
- Inspire others to know and experience God.

Congregations that value effective Christian education support teachers in strengthening the above characteristics. The congregation helps teachers and small group leaders grow in knowledge, develop skills, and deepen their relationships with God.

The world has changed, and the church is experiencing constant change and transition. The ideas found in this document provide a “big picture” of effective teaching and learning.

By necessity you will need to determine the specifics of what that big picture looks like in your congregational context. We do not live in a “one size fits all” world. The basics are still the basics; but the basics can be designed and delivered in multiple ways.

What an opportunity we have before us! We are called by God to share the good news of God’s redeeming love through Jesus Christ with those who have never heard, with those who have forgotten the stories, and with those who are wondering what’s next. We may not have all the answers, but we are servants of the living God, the Holy One who has, is, and always will be actively working for the good of humanity and the created order.

Thanks be to God!

Additional Resources

Guidelines for Christian Education, 2009-2012

A booklet with practical information about planning for intentional faith development in a congregational setting

Leadership Leaflets for Leaders in Christian Education and Formation Ministry

A series of free leaflets focusing on various aspects of teaching and learning; www.gbod.org/education

- Assess Your Congregation’s Policies
- Assess Your Facilities and Equipment
- Assessing Ministry
- Budgeting for Education and Formation
- Choosing Curriculum Resources
- Classroom Environment
- Creating Job Descriptions
- Development Through the Life Span
- Forming An Effective Ministry Team
- Getting the Word Out
- Recruiting, Nurturing, and Supporting Effective Teachers
- Teachers as Spiritual Leaders and Theologians
- Teachers Know Their Place in the Faith Story
- Teachers Live the Faith
- Understanding The United Methodist Church
- Who Am I as a Teacher?

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Lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (Colossians 1:10-12).