

Selecting Curriculum Materials

National Ministries, American Baptist Churches, USA

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Introduction

When it's time to order materials for your church's educational activities, it is helpful to begin by exploring assumptions that might be at play. Christian education committee members often function with the unspoken assumption that if they are able to select the perfect "curriculum," then any problems related to their church's educational program would be solved. Unfortunately this is magical thinking that is grounded in a fundamental misconception about "curriculum."

You'll notice as you read through this guide that the terms "curriculum materials" and "educational resources" are used instead of "curriculum." While educators don't entirely agree on a definition of "curriculum," they do agree on this: the materials we use (leader's guides, student books, VBS kits) are *tools* within your curriculum, but they are not curriculum itself. Curriculum includes your goals, expectations, and contexts, as well as the atmosphere, methods, leader skills, and overall experience of the participants.

It is this attention to the entire enterprise in your church that will make your ministries of education church vibrant, formative, and life-giving. In turn, it is this attention to the enterprise, its vision as well as its execution, that must guide your selection of curriculum materials. Of course, we'll all probably continue to use the term "curriculum" as shorthand for the print resources, CDs, and videos that we use in our educational ministries, but it is crucial that the process of selecting those items begin with an eye toward the bigger picture.

This model is for individuals and committees who oversee the ministries of education in their local congregations and who want to select educational resources that reflect the needs and expectations of those communities. It is just one possible way of going about that task and by no means *the* way. This model does, however, take into consideration the larger context of a given church's teaching ministries, while being grounded in quality educational, ecclesiastical, and theological foundations and outlining a practical step by step process.

Overview of the Model

I would like to invite you to picture your church's ministries of education as a three-story house (see **image on page 13**). The process of selecting curriculum materials is on the 1st floor (practice) and is informed by the work done on the 2nd floor (planning) and in the attic (vision). This is not an entirely hierarchical model, however. Since educational ministry is best carried out as an action-reflection endeavor (or as praxis), the influence flows in both directions. While practice is informed by the planning and planning is guided by the vision, reflection on practice must in turn inform both planning and vision—otherwise the educational endeavor will become stagnant and tradition-bound. Taking a look at the house floor by floor will help “bring this model home.”

The Attic: The Vision

The attic is where visioning is done—where we ask the big questions, such as, “Why are we doing this?” or “What do we hope to accomplish?” It is also where we define important concepts. If your purpose, for example, is *to hand on the faith to the next generation*, you will need a clear definition of what “handing on the faith” is—what would it look like to have successfully handed on the faith? Or if your goal is *to offer Bible-based education*, it will be essential to define “Bible-based.” Some churches might say that a service-learning project, such as gathering food for a food pantry, is Bible-based in that it gives learners the experience of living out the biblical call to feed the hungry, whereas others might think Bible-based means memorization of verses and references. Careful attention to identifying purposes and to defining terms are crucial components of delineating the church's overall vision of its educational endeavor.

The Second Floor: Planning

The second floor is where planning is done. It is where we address the practical questions about contexts (e.g. church, community, national and world situations, family life of learners), venues (e.g. Sunday school, midweek gathering, VBS, baptismal preparation, mission trips), participants (e.g. age levels, backgrounds, new members, life-long participants), resources (e.g. space, finances, time), personnel (e.g. experienced or inexperienced, confident or anxious) and approach (traditional, rotation, combined). The answers to these questions will inform the practices. It is here that the guidelines for selecting your curriculum materials can be formulated.

The answers to key planning questions should reflect the vision statement. If they don't, some reflection is in order. Perhaps the vision statement is idealized rather than authentic to your context—it sounds good but doesn't reflect the realities of your congregation. Perhaps the terms need clearer definition. Or perhaps the answers to the planning questions reflect “the way things were done when I grew up” rather than embodying the educational vision. Since these answers will help guide the practices, it is essential that any contradiction between the attic and the second floor be explored and strategies identified for bringing the two in line with one another. Unless the vision and planning harmonize, your ministry will model and teach through experience that it's okay for Christians to “believe” one thing and then doing another.

The First Floor: Practice

We often think of educational practice as what takes place in the classroom or around the campfire. In fact, the practice of education includes many tasks that go on behind the scenes and before the session time. The identification of desired outcomes, the preparation of materials and spaces, study for the session, the selection of methods and materials—these are all components of the practice of education. All the tasks associated with the actual practice of education in the church, including selection of curriculum materials, are best carried out within the context of a

process that includes visioning and planning. Following a process, such as the one outlined below, will help insure that the materials you choose meet the needs, expectations, and realities of your particular context.

The Process

The general process is as follows:

I. Vision

A. Distribute the Vision Questionnaire to members of the Christian Education Committee and to a cross section of your church family.

B. Review the responses to question 1 to create a purpose statement.

C. Identify and define key concepts in the purpose statement. Refer to answers to questions 2 and 3 to create working definitions that reflect your context.

D. The combined purpose statement and key definitions can serve as your vision statement. Present the statement to church for input and approval.

II. Planning

A. Complete the Planning Questionnaire.

B. Review the Sample Guidelines for one model of how to organize your criteria.

C. Formulate guidelines for evaluating curriculum materials based on your vision statement and responses to the Planning Questionnaire.

III. Selection

A. Obtain curriculum samples by downloading them from the Judson Press website (www.judsonpress.com), from curriculum publishers' sites or by ordering them from publishers.

B. Obtain a copy of the curriculum materials comparison chart in the Judson Press Christian education catalog or on the Judson website (www.judsonpress.com).

- C.** Visit websites or review catalog descriptions for curriculum lines not carried by Judson Press. (Let us know if you find something good, so we update the materials we carry.)
- D.** Use your guidelines to review the samples and descriptions and select good prospects.
- E.** Do practice sessions of prospects and then evaluate them according to your guidelines.

Vision Questionnaire (1 of 2)

We are in the process of forming a vision statement that will guide our ministries of education. When you have completed this questionnaire, please return it to _____ by _____.

Thank you for your input.

1. The goal of educational programming in the church is to: (Please check all that apply.)

- bring people to salvation through Jesus
- help people become good church members
- get to know God
- gain Bible knowledge
- increase church membership
- help people become good citizens
- help people embrace the biblical vision of justice
- give people an understanding of what it means to be American Baptist
- increase self-knowledge
- introduce learners to the heroes and heroines of the faith
- improve relationships
- improve the moral climate of our culture
- other _____

2. “Biblical education” means: (Please check all that apply.)

- hearing the stories of Scripture
- memorization of the books of the Bible and important verses
- in-depth study of texts
- learning basic Bible study skills
- participating in experiences that flesh out Scriptural imperatives
- interpreting Bible stories through drama, art, or music
- discussing the meaning of texts and applying them to our personal lives
- reviewing a number of texts related to a given topic
- learning moral imperatives taught in the Bible
- having learning experiences that are characterized by love, forgiveness, and acceptance
- other _____

Vision Questionnaire (2 of 2)

3. Please complete the following statements.

- The main role of the teacher is

- The best approach to teaching Christian faith is

- The educational atmosphere should be

- I will know I have learned when

- I will know that children have learned when

- Knowing the Bible means

- If I were to select three things that everyone in the church would know, experience, or do, they would be

Planning Questionnaire

1. What venue of educational ministry are you selecting curriculum materials for? (Sunday school, midweek study, VBS, mission trips, youth group)
2. What ages and how many participants do you expect?
3. How will participants be grouped?
4. Will your participants attend regularly or will each session need to be self-contained?
5. What do you want participants to take away from the experience?
6. To what extent will family participation be a factor?
7. What assets and limitations are there in your educational space?
8. How much time will you have for each session?
9. How many and how experienced are your leaders and helpers?
10. How much preparation can you expect your leaders to put in?
11. How much direction will your leaders need (scripting of presentation)?
12. How much money is available for the entire endeavor?

13. How much of the money do we want to dedicate to purchasing curriculum materials?
14. What do we want to be our primary approaches (storytelling, active learning, discussion)?
15. What Bible version do we want to use?
16. What parts of the Bible are most important?
17. What do we want to communicate about Jesus? About God? About the Holy Spirit?
18. Is there something else that you feel should be considered?

Sample Guidelines for Evaluating Curriculum Materials (1 of 2)

Theological Considerations

The material:

- presents a Trinitarian view of God
- emphasizes God's love and forgiveness
- presents Jesus as both human and divine and as the supreme revelation of God's mercy
- presents the Holy Spirit as God's guiding presence for churches and individuals
- uses both male and female biblical imagery for God
- presents human beings as created in God's good image, fallen, and redeemed by Christ
- affirms human responsibility to God's creation and creatures

Biblical Considerations

The material:

- affirms the Bible as the foundation of our faith
- uses an accessible version of the Bible and age-appropriate retelling of Bible stories
- reflects sound biblical scholarship and honesty in approaching the Word
- presents a balance of Old and New Testament texts
- focuses on understanding, encountering, experiencing, and applying Scripture to everyday life

Educational Considerations

- Activities reflect carefully defined objectives.
- Leader directions are clear and easy to follow and require limited prep time.
- Sufficient, concise, and clear background on Scripture is provided for leaders.
- Expectations, content, and methods are age-appropriate.

Sample Guidelines for Evaluating Curriculum Materials (2 of 2)

- A variety of methods are used, some of which are active, experiential, and creative.
- Participants are not over-directed; questions and exploration are encouraged.
- Leaders are seen as co-learners and learners of all ages are respected.
- Love and invitation, rather than guilt, manipulation, or coercion are used to move persons ahead in their relationships with God.
- Illustrations are relevant to “where learners are.”
- Artwork is inclusive.
- Stories are and devoid of racial, ethnic, cultural, class, or gender stereotypes.

Ecclesiastical Considerations

- The church is presented as the continuation of Jesus’ ministry.
- The failings of the church are addressed honestly.
- Contemporary as well as historical examples of faithfulness are explored.
- The material can be adapted to include American Baptist identity.
- Other traditions are treated respectfully and with a recognition of diversity among Christians.

Practical Considerations

- The resource is affordable, efficient, and creation-friendly (no unnecessary consumables).
- Needed materials are readily accessible and inexpensive.
- Inclusive language is used when referring to persons.
- Opportunities are provided for application of what is learned through service projects.
- The materials are flexible enough to work within our constraints (leaders, space, time).
- Family participation is enlisted without marginalizing those without supportive families.

