



A TURNING POINT FOR CURRICULUM: HOW DID WE GET HERE & WHERE ARE WE GOING? BY FRANK PROCTOR

Throughout the twentieth century, a number of trends in curriculum resources made their way into our churches. Each time a curriculum resource was about to retire or was in need of being revised, a new approach to Christian education came into play. That moment led to a rethinking of the underlying educational and theological theories in shaping a new product. Let's review a few of those basic principles and the curriculum materials that grew out of the corresponding theories:

1940–50: *The Uniform Lesson Series* was based on the outlines for studying Scripture in a structured manner. The structure was selected by churches who were working together in the National Council of Churches of Christ's Division of Christian Education. *The Uniform Lesson Series* had sophisticated age-level divisions with distinctions for how people, particularly children, learn differently in each stage. Unlike earlier materials, the time assigned learning activities was different for

each age level. The most common teaching strategy still relied heavily upon the Bible story as told and interpreted by a teacher serving as the primary leader. The system also assumed a complex structure of organization for each age level of teachers, officers, and overseeing superintendents, which was inherited from earlier generations of the Sunday School movement.

1960–70: *Covenant Life Curriculum* was the first curriculum product of the newly formed United Church of Christ. This resource was influenced significantly by the work of scholars led by D. Campbell Wyckoff. It was built on the basic assumption that Christian learning occurs within the whole setting of the

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community of faith and fellowship. It was understood that the family played an essential role in the education of children and youth. It was noted for its sophisticated artwork, which took advantage of the cultural developments in the arts in the later part of the 1950's and early 1960's. There were hardcover books for children with

take-home stories that focused on the values and attributes of an authentic Christian life. This resource was developed when the culture was seeing many families with young children attending and joining churches. At that time, there were still significant financial resources available to produce a product of high quality, both materially and educationally.

At the same time there began to grow the conviction that people needed the kind of support found in small groups in order to pursue the life changes that are demanded by the Scriptures. In small groups one generally feels more comfortable asking the complicated and difficult questions of life. Emphasis upon small groups learning together, such as the *Serendipity* study materials for youth and adults, was added to our programs of Christian education. Such small groups were often scheduled at times other than Sunday morning. We began to emphasize intergenerational settings for learning as well.

1970–80: *Christian Education—Shared Approaches (CE:SA)*: At the height of loyalty to Christian unity and the ecumenical movement, this resource was developed in partnership with several denominations. It was based on the assumption that the principles of Christian learning were similar



across denominational experiences. There were four different approaches developed because it was believed that there is more richness in an ecumenically produced curriculum. Some congregations could focus on memorizing data about the Bible (*Knowing the Word*); others might focus on teaching people how to understand and participate in the process of interpreting scripture for everyday living (*Interpreting the Word*). Another approach began with issues and questions of life and then examined how scripture truths spoke to those issues (*Living the Word*). Finally, a more radical approach to learning than what was previously used, *Doing the Word* was based on the premise that mission and service outside the congregation can help us to grow in faith, especially when we stop to reflect on and draw conclusions about the implications and meanings of our experiences. This advancement of an ecumenically produced curriculum resource also meant that denominational identity was expunged from the materials.

1990's–2000 Christian Education scholars found new energy for education by shaping materials around the theory of Multiple Intelligences as outlined by Howard Gardner. This understanding reminded us that individuals take in information by using a variety of learning styles unique to the individual. These differences remain fairly consistent throughout the life span; therefore, each lesson accounted for and used these different inclinations.

This was the basis for the teaching strategies in the *Bible Quest* curriculum materials. It also had popular expression in the adoption by many churches of the **Workshop Rotation** model.

At the same time, emphasis was placed on learning that occurs in the midst of all congregational life, hence the interest and adoption of curriculum materials designed around the liturgical year. Lectionary-based materials such as *The Whole People of God*, *The Inviting Word* (UCC), and *Seasons of the Spirit* were produced. This latter resource introduced an on-line network component as part of its materials. An entirely different approach grew out of Jerome Berryman's work for children on **Godly Play**, with its emphasis on the liturgy of learning—learning in and through worship.

What does the current situation present to us? What is this generation facing in the way of a whole sea change in faith formation for the church? I suggest that there are two trends that bear serious examination and experimentation.

Christian Practices

There is growing conversation around shaping educational method and content with living Christian practices. This work was triggered by the scholarship of Dorothy Bass and her colleagues. New talk of materials and curriculum resources is no longer growing out of marketing strategies. Instead, it is a new kind of conversation which involves theologians, biblical scholars,

pastors, church educators, youth ministers, and Sunday School teachers. The content and method are synonymous with such practices that denote a Christian disciple as distinct from others folks in our culture: practices such as prayer, meditation, hospitality, observing Sabbath, and serving others.

The United Church of Christ has wholeheartedly embraced this strategy in developing *Faith Practices*, which will be available solely through an on-line subscription service for use in September 2010. No longer will there need to be significant amounts of capital invested in printed, packaged, and mailed materials.



Electronic Communication

Another issue has to do more with method than with theory. It is the overwhelming presence and impact of the electronic communication network. Churches are finding new and remarkable ways of using the Internet to talk about faith. This is not the process that many used for developing computer labs within Sunday School programs; this is communicating one-to-one or in chat groups. It is amazing for someone like me, who experienced most of the settings for education that I have described above, to learn that many people are more self-revealing on the Internet than to their psychiatrist or in the



confessional. Many people spend ten times the hours on the Internet or text messaging than they do in a classroom or reading books or newspapers. Data from 2005 reports that one in eight marriages that year were between people who first met on the Internet. It is a place for talking, reading, discussing, and learning.

Here are a few ways that churches are using the electronic media for faith formation:

- On-line distance learning courses
- Bible study blogs and e-mails
- MySpace, Facebook, YouTube
- On-line religion and theological courses from universities and seminaries
- The Thoughtful Christian: www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com
- *F a i t h P r a c t i c e s* (www.FaithPractices.org), website-based curriculum resources

The old hymn tells us that “new occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth.” Undoubtedly the process and the content of faith formation is ready for a significant change. Are we? Are we open and willing to learn and to change?

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