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Curriculum and the Ministry of Christian Education

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:42, 44-47

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is describing the course of the Church's life – its purpose and its actions. We can think of this as the church's curriculum. The word curriculum comes from the Latin verb *currere*, which means, "to run." Taken literally, curriculum means a course to be run, just as the early Church lived out its existence. Today it is much the same; the curriculum is our total experience of Christian education and formation. It involves every facet of discipleship, at every age, when we:

- Proclaim the word of Jesus' resurrection (*Kerygma*)
- Teach the sacred story and its meaning to our lives (*Didache*)
- Come together to pray and re-present Jesus in the breaking of the bread (*Leiturgia*)
- Live in community with one another (*Koinonia*)
- Care for those in need (*Diakonia*)

We often understand curriculum in a narrow sense, seeing it only as a set of materials – the books for teachers and students. It is more accurate to speak of these as curricular materials and resources, recognizing that they are only part of the whole curriculum for education in the church. We always need to be mindful of how worship, proclamation, community and service continually forms us as people of God, whether we are children, youth or adults.

Curriculum materials and resources are developed to help carry out the general plan or design for Christian education in a congregation. Since we are learning all the time, we also must be aware of all that is going into our design for learning. Part of choosing the right curricular materials involves understanding the **explicit** curriculum (what is actually presented, consciously and with intention) as well as the **implicit** curriculum (room design, attitudes and learning styles). Some implicit curriculum teaches by its presence and some by its absence. For example, a room design with the teacher standing in front of a group of students implicitly teaches, "I have the answer. I will tell you what you are to learn and you will learn it." When we ask questions that require reciting back the facts of a bible story, we teach the learners that it is important to know the story as it happened. If we ignore questions about what the bible story means for life today, we teach that Bible stories are only for the past and do not help us live today. Implicit curriculum is not limited to

content. By providing a variety of learning activities in a teaching design, we teach our students that their opinions, preferences and learning styles are important.

Christian Education is a continual process of critical reflection on participation and practice in the light of the Gospel. We are formed as Christians through our participation in and practice of the Christian life of faith. The curricular materials we choose to assist us in teaching are an important part of by which knowledge and skills important to the Christian life of faith are acquired.

Jesus' teaching was not based on memorization, repetition and recitation, but rather on spontaneous creative responses to situations and experiences. He wove daily life experiences into his teaching and reflected on life experiences. And the authority for his teaching was his life itself. Any teaching ministry in the name of Jesus will follow his example seriously. Curricular work is holy work, religious work, and that God dwells with us as we do it, in the midst of each of the processes we choose to do.

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom: Enlighten by your Holy Spirit those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. The Book of Common Prayer

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Evaluating & Choosing Curriculum

Evaluating and selecting curriculum may be one of the most important tasks of a Christian educator (besides being a role model and spiritual guide). Each congregation is different with their own needs and desires – one size doesn't fit all! It is important for more than one person to evaluate and choose a curriculum, whether it is for children, youth or adults. A committee should be formed that includes clergy, Christian education director or administrator and teachers or adults who provide educational leadership. If materials for youth are being considered, there should be at least 2 youth also involved.

Choosing a new curriculum should be intentional, keeping in mind many factors so that the resource materials you use with your children, youth or adults provide a teaching and learning environment that promotes faithfulness.

Questions to ask about your church community:

- *Mission*
 - What is your congregation's mission statement or vision?
 - How can curriculum support it?
- *Bible*
 - What are the Biblical needs of your congregation?
 - Are they already familiar with the Bible and key stories, or is basic instruction needed?
 - Is there a desire to integrate faith with daily living?
- *Priorities*

What are the most important aspects for your congregation in using a curriculum?

 - Gospel based, outreach & mission focused and/or worship centered?
 - Doctrinal teachings and creedal statements that reflect your tradition?
 - Communication for linking home and church?
 - Ease of use: lesson plan, preparation time, substance of content?
 - Aesthetics: quality of materials, artwork, website, music, layout, etc.?
 - Sociological concerns: roles of people, racial inclusiveness and diversity, historical perspectives and accuracy?
- *Teachers*
 - Are your teachers experienced or new?
 - What support do they need for teaching the curriculum?
- *Attendance*
 - What is your Sunday Church School (or other group) attendance?
 - Has it changed in recent years? What are the attendance patterns?
 - What are the implications to a curriculum series or scope?

Questions to ask when evaluating current curriculum or looking at new material:

1. What is the theology of the curriculum? What are the assumptions regarding the teacher and student's relationship to God?

2. What is the educational praxis (mode of learning) basic to Christian formation for this education program? (For example: "Scripture, Tradition & Reason" in The Episcopal Church and "Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience" in the United Methodist Church).

3. What is the end goal for the individual (student and teacher)? How is discipleship built through the materials?

4. What type of curriculum is this (lectionary, thematic, Montessori, story-based, etc.)? What are the needs of your church regarding the type of curriculum chosen?

5. How does the material relate to daily life?

6. What is the expectation for teacher knowledge about child development and learning? About Christian formation (worship and service)? About Scripture and use of the Bible? About your denomination – beliefs, history, structure?

7. What are the expectations for teacher preparation?
8. What is the role of the teacher? Guide, facilitator, mentor, administrator, authority?
9. Is there any provision included for teacher training? If so, what is it?
10. Is there any provision for leadership (Director’s manual)? If so, what is it?
11. How is Scripture presented? (Literal, open for interpretation, etc.)
12. What is the language for God? Inclusive? Masculine/gender neutral?

13. Do the suggested lesson related activities provide for student interaction in a variety of creative expressions, using different learning styles through music, art, movement, drama, writing, storytelling, science, etc.?

14. Are the different age levels comparable in format, content and theology? (Writers often author different age levels)

15. Is there a component for worship?

16. How does the curriculum relate to your church, community, and the world?

17. What are the basic costs? Are there any hidden costs, such as the need to purchase special materials and supplemental supplies in addition to the curriculum?

Curriculum Evaluation Worksheet

Publisher: _____ Date: _____
 Curriculum: _____ Age level: _____
 Website: _____

Rating Scale

Strong – Weak

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

1. Objectives

Lessons and units have clearly defined objectives, stating in measurable terms (not vague generalities) what learners will do as evidence of their learning. Learning activities are suggested in each lesson that leads to the accomplishment of the stated objectives. Objectives are compatible and supportive of the goals established for the church's educational ministries and mission.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. Theological Emphasis

The major doctrines and beliefs our church (denomination) wants to teach are clearly presented. Lesson content reflects an appreciation of essential truths as taught by our church. Examples and illustrations include church situations that are familiar to our people. A basic faith vocabulary is taught. Lessons present all ages as valuable, participating members of the church.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. Biblical Interpretation

Lessons accurately present the teachings of Scripture passages being studied and do not impose arbitrary or external interpretations, such as moral lessons. Learners are encouraged and given frequent opportunities to explore the Scriptures themselves. God is presented as merciful, loving, and forgiving as well as a God of judgment. Jesus Christ is presented as being fully human and fully divine. The major themes of the Bible (creation, sin, judgment, redemption, resurrection, etc.) are developed age-appropriately.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Content

The percentage of Old Testament, Gospel, and New Testament are acceptable. According to the church's needs, there are lessons appropriate for Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. There are lessons about Baptism and Eucharist. Church history is studied at appropriate age levels as well as church leaders according to the church's polity and history.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. Life Application

All lessons guide learners to consider the practical implications of the concepts being studied to their personal lives. All lessons provide learning activities that effectively move learners toward putting the lesson focus into practice. The life situations are realistic for the age level being addressed. The material encourages application of biblical principals to major social issues in the world today.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. Methodology

All lessons provide a balance of learning procedures, including both input from the teacher and active learner involvement. Throughout the duration of a course, a variety of learning activities is provided to accommodate the varied learning styles

of participants. The suggested methods are ones that teachers and learners find comfortable and are a mixture of ideas designed to encourage healthy creativity and innovation. There are activities and times to review and repeat new learnings. Most materials needed to teach the lessons and complete activities are included or easily accessible.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Flexibility

Session plans provide ample alternatives to fit a variety of class situations and teaching skills. Suggestions and tips are provided to help teachers in effectively using or adapting the ideas presented. Ideas are given so teachers can offer appropriate choices to learners in order to meet the distinct needs of individuals. The teacher is encouraged to present lessons in varied ways. (Check three lessons in a row to see if this occurs).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. Age-level Appropriateness

Content to be taught is appropriate to the experiences and interests of the selected age level. Adequate help is given the teacher for ways to help students understand lesson content. Learning activities fit the abilities and attitudes of the age level. Material allows students to develop their own creativity instead of “filling in” patterns with busy work. The material is consistent with our understanding of the stages of faith development.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. Preparation Procedures

Each lesson provides guidance for the teacher’s own personal and spiritual growth in response to the content to be taught. Materials and supplies suggested for use in the sessions are inexpensive and readily obtained and prepared. Preparation of each lesson can easily be done within a reasonable time, enabling the average teacher to feel confident in approaching the session. The teacher’s manual is concise and clearly organized. The teacher is provided with helps to evaluate class learning and teacher effectiveness.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

10. Appearance and Visual Appeal

All materials intended for use by learners are visually attractive and designed appropriately for the intended grade level. All materials intended for use by teachers are presented in a consistent, easy-to-read format. Role stereotypes are avoided in the narrative and artwork; materials are sensitive to and affirm the personal worth and dignity of every individual. Non-sexist language is used consistently. Graphics, photographs, and art accurately illustrate biblical settings and consistently reflect the full diversity of contemporary people to whom the church is called to minister. Illustrations reflect the aim of the lesson and are not mere decoration. If in print form, the material is on a good quality, recyclable paper.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

11. Home Involvement

The material suggests ways to involve the home in the learning process. Materials are appropriate for a variety of family situations that compile the membership of the parish. There are meaningful take-home materials that communicate the lesson aim.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

12. Cost and Value

The price of the materials fairly represents the quality and workmanship of the products. Do benefits of the curriculum provide balance for the cost? The cost of the materials fits within the amount we have budgeted.

Formation: Participation & Practice

The whole life of the congregation forms Christians in either positive or negative ways.

1. **Participation in the Communal Rites of the Church.** Ritual worship is the primary responsibility of the Church, and nothing else that it does can compare in importance. If the Church only gathers for worship, it need not question its place or influence in the world. If it loses faith in the act of worship, if it is mindless in ordering and careless in the conduct of worship, it cannot expect its other activities to save it, for it is dead in its heart. This explains why, historically, when the Church discerned that it was not living faithfully, it revived itself by engaging in liturgical reform. It also explains why participation in the rites of the Church have always been considered essential for all persons, regardless of age.
2. **The Environment.** All that we see, touch, taste, smell, and hear, as well as the arrangement of space in which we gather and live, significantly influences us. We shape our space, and then it shapes us. Our space, what we put into it, and how we arrange and shape it, encourages or discourages particular actions and interactions.
3. **The Ordering of Time.** The Church has a calendar based on a story. Our faith, character, and consciousness are shaped, and community made possible, by the internalizing of that story.
4. **The Organization of Our Life.** The question for us is, “How does our life together contribute to God's reign, and equip us for ministry in daily life and work; and how do the activities and programs sponsored by the Church make contributions to this end?”
5. **Communal Interactions.** Life in the congregation should be a sign to the world of what life in God's reign looks like.
6. **Role Models.** Role models are those persons, past and present, whom we raise up to be examples of some aspect of the Christian life.
7. **Disciplines.** We learn to be virtuous by practicing the virtues. We learn to pray by the practice of prayer; we learn to care for others by the practice of caring.
8. **Language.** When we listen and do not object to sexist or racist remarks, we encourage their continuance, and contribute to the oppression of others. When we neglect feminine images of God, we make our God too small. As Christians we need to be intentional about how we talk and write.

*How is faith being formed in your congregation today?
What do we learn about what we are teaching as we examine our life together?*

The Catechetical Ministry

The Church has tended to separate its life into separate areas of discipline that have become associated with secular disciplines. Catechesis has been modeled on the public school. Curriculum and the teaching of children have been primarily concentration. (The architecture of suburban churches built following WWII sometimes look just like the suburban school down the street! Pastoral care has been modeled on the therapist's practice. What was once conceived of as separate disciplines must now be seen as a unified catechetical ministry informed by the Baptismal Covenant rather than by secular models.

What does the six dimensions of communal life within the church as they relate to the Baptismal Covenant look like now? What is our vision of the future?

1. Worship & Preaching

Now:

Future:

2. Ethics & Moral Values

Now:

Future:

3. Spirituality & Prayer

Now:

Future:

4. Pastoral Care

Now:

Future:

5. Education

Now:

Future:

6. Relationships with other Faith Traditions

Now:

Future:

The above two pages are adapted by "Discovering Called to Teach and Learn," a support document to the Catechetical book of The Episcopal Church, "Called to Teach and Learn"