

What Makes Christian Education Exciting? by Brennetta C. Williams

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Christian education plays a vital role in facilitating spiritual growth and discipleship of believers. The focus of an effective Christian education ministry must be on allowing the Word of God to nurture believers in faith and equip them with knowledge of the Word that leads to their living victorious lives that are anchored in the Word. Christian education also provides an educational process that serves as the foundation for lifelong learning and spiritual development.

Christian education encompasses a multiplicity of educational settings including one-on-one and group settings. Each setting can provide a measure of spiritual growth if the correct teaching methods are used.

Christian education undergirds all ministries. Since Christian education is so vital to the life of the believer and essential to the body of Christ, it is necessary that we establish Christian education ministries that meet the needs of today's Church. Christian education ministries should be continually evolving and provide relevant (and some would even say counter-cultural) approaches to learning the Bible and the creeds and rituals of a church.

Unfortunately, numerous churches are challenged with the dilemma of how to create and maintain vibrant educational ministries and programs that keep congregants engaged. Traditionally, many churches have maintained an hour of Sunday school, midweek Bible Study, and a new member's discipleship course. These program formats may have served the church well in the past; however, countless churches have experienced sharp decreases in commitment to regular attendance and support of their Christian education ministries. There is clearly a need to examine the effectiveness of traditional programs and classes.

Churches that want to do more than plateau must ask, How does the church keep Christian education as a central focus and make it exciting? Below, I offer five considerations for establishing or maintaining a stimulating Christian education ministry.

First, an exciting Christian education ministry should be divinely inspired and communicated from each church's visionary—the pastor. Pastors are cognizant that Christian education is instrumental to the process of developing mature Christians. The visionary also has or should have firsthand knowledge of the needs of the sheep. Therefore, there must be a solid collaboration between the visionary and Christian education leaders. It is imperative that leaders and educators implement an educational system that is in alignment with the vision and the visionary. Once the direction has been communicated via the pastor, it is the responsibility of those assigned to develop a methodology of Christian education that fits the needs of that specific congregation. If a church lacks leaders with the training and skill-sets to create the methodology, it falls to the pastor to do it or hire someone to do it. Quality Christian education cannot be entrusted to just anyone; too much is at stake.

Second, Christian education programs and classes must be designed in a way that clearly shows an excitement for the Word of God. The Word is alive and pregnant with possibilities! The Word is powerful, igniting, and inspiring! The excitement of the Word must be conveyed with an enthusiasm that is contagious and thought-provoking and that challenges believers to desire to learn more. I believe congregants are hungry for spiritual knowledge and want to know more about God. One of the greatest responsibilities in the area of Christian education is to provide avenues for congregants to do just this.

As part of a Christian education ministry methodology, strategic programs should be developed with this as an objective. Curriculums that engage participants and require active involvement by participants have proven to be the most effective. Increased participation by Christian education students leads to increased excitement on their part. So, Christian education instructors must teach with an unwavering passion for God and the Word. The level of passion should be so great that it ignites a fire for greater learning by students. If a class is dull, declining in student attendance, etc., the element of excitement is surely missing.

Third, it is important that churches examine the way in which they communicate the Bible and all spiritual knowledge. Methods do matter. We live in a fast-paced society that seeks instantaneous outcomes. The methods by which many churchgoers learn have changed; the dispensing of a great deal of information is now interactive. Most youth are completely bored if they are lectured to for an hour on material that either isn't relevant to their lives or is not taught in a way that helps them easily grasp the relevancy. However, if **relevant** information were conveyed digitally by video or some interactive electronic method, the level of interest would undoubtedly increase. The same is true for young adults and even middle-aged adults. Churches ignore this fact at great peril.

Given that Christian education ministries are largely operated by volunteers, countless numbers of whom are age sixty-plus, consideration should also be given to what to do when educators will not adapt to utilizing new technology for instructional purposes. In some cases, even those who believe themselves to be technologically illiterate can be taught how to bring a measure of interactive technology to their instruction. But, churches must be willing to invest the time and money to make this happen. Training for all Christian educators, young and old, should consist of classes, seminars, and hands-on instruction from experts. The expert cannot be the long-time superintendent of a declining Sunday School Department or the long-time head of a Christian Education Ministry.

Investing in the development of quality educators yields maximum educational results in the life of the congregation. We must be innovative in our approach to sharing biblical truths as well as open to approaching learning from different perspectives. In some instances, it may be necessary for churches to revamp the entire ministry. If a ship is sinking, someone must sound the alarm! The role of the pastor is especially important here too. Only a seasoned pastor can move the unmovable teacher or build a new world around them that helps them get the message that their methods are no longer working. Failure to implement the necessary adjustments and adapt to the changing requirements of disciples will yield ineffective ministry in the area of Christian education.

Fourth, in order to build a more exciting Christian education ministry, the church must approach the needs of the congregation holistically. Christian education students cannot afford to attend classes and programs that do not help them with everyday living. Another lecture, verse by verse, about Moses crossing the Red Sea, Adam and Eve sinning in the garden, or Joseph and his rise from a pit to a palace will not make students return to and participate in classes at churches. However, what if the story of Moses crossing the Red Sea were turned into a series of classes or a seminar on gaining greater life skills so that the Red Seas that confront people could be crossed? Alternatively, what if the story of Adam and Eve could be turned into a series of classes on modern-day temptations, how to avoid them, and how to live with the consequences? In addition, what if the scenic backdrop for each class was a garden located in a home?

What if students were allowed to submit anonymously a list of their greatest temptations, and outside guest teachers who were Christians and thoroughly trained to address issues such as (sexuality, loneliness, egocentrism, lack of self-esteem, and greed) came in to teach for a month? Sound helpful and exciting? I think so. Single parents who are stressed about finances would benefit from a financial management class, and maybe the class could be held on a Monday night, not a Sunday morning. Perhaps senior saints would be blessed by a seminar on coping with loneliness, staying healthy, and coping with living in a faced-paced society. Clearly, Christian education remains exciting by providing students **holistic education** that is always undergirded by the Word.

Fifth, Christian education ministries should be adaptable to meeting the needs of the contemporary lifestyle. I briefly alluded to this immediately above. As churches reevaluate the current effectiveness of their education ministries, it is important to exercise flexibility in scheduling. Your Church School may have convened at 9:00 a.m. every Sunday morning for the past 50 years. However, Saturday morning at 10:00 a.m. may fit more congregants' schedules. Hand out surveys that allow members to tell you anonymously. Making an adjustment in program scheduling can result in greater attendance and participation. Adaptability may include increasing the number of Bible studies currently available to accommodate the needs of the congregation. For example, if a church's demographics indicate a large percentage of youth members, additional Christian education activities on Fridays and Saturdays will likely be required. If yours is largely a church filled with seniors, Sunday morning may be fine, but a Wednesday afternoon may even be better, or why not do both? This could allow more opportunities for seniors to get out of their homes and mix and mingle with others. Creating innovative approaches tailored to meet the needs of specific congregant groups will result in increased excitement and participation by these segments of the congregation.

Hopefully, these five suggestions will aid you in your efforts to gain greater participation in your Christian education ministry. All of us need to be more knowledgeable of the Word of God; the job of pastors and Christian educators is to persuade believers (through the most effective and exciting methods) that this is true.