



By Diana Hynson

Cultivating Resident Theologians

We cannot overestimate the importance of the teacher's influence in the classroom. Having a loving, consistent, faithful adult in the classroom is a real treasure. While much has been said about the transformational power of the teacher as an ordinary person who can make an extraordinary impact, let's think for a moment about another role: the resident theologian in the classroom.

Students of all ages will look to the teacher to have some confidence and competence in the subject matter. They may assume a theological wellspring of experience and information. Persons outside the class may likewise assume that a person who accepts the teaching ministry, and who has been accepted by the church for that ministry, has sufficient gifts to at least "do not harm"—and that is a legitimate assumption.

As the pastor, you are the "resident theologian" within the congregation as a whole. Regardless of the theological skills, experience, and training of anyone else in the church, you are the one who has, or who is working toward, professional level competence in matters of Bible and theology. How are you making those gifts available to your teachers and education leaders?

Here are a few suggestions:

- Make at least some of your reference library available to your teachers.
- Have a periodic "Bible hotline" chat with teachers in which you invite them to present Scriptures or theological issues with which they have been wrestling.
- Take one Sunday per quarter to have substitute teachers in all the classrooms so that the regular teachers can spend one session with you. If you need to have someone cover your pulpit, invite a Lay Speaker.
- Lead an evening Bible study and encourage the teachers to attend.
- Put a Question Box somewhere convenient to receive teacher's biblical and theological inquiries and respond to them (or some of them) in the church newsletter.

Supporting the "Home Grown" Educator

Many churches are hiring persons from within the congregation to lead their educational ministry. Certainly these "home grown" staff members have a heart for education. Many come from the ranks of professional schoolteachers and have fine educational credentials. The next step is to ensure that they have 1) professional level credentials in Christian education and 2) the means to acquire whatever training and development they need. Your support can be invaluable.

Here's how you can help.

- Work with the Staff Parish Relations and Finance Committees to budget time and money for professional development for your educator.
- Interpret and support the work of the educator from the pulpit and within the church council. Help the congregation recognize the value of this ministry so that they are willing to support the financial commitment of both salary and professional development.
- Recognize and acknowledge the "first-class" status of the educator on the staff. Not everyone needs to be ordained, but their faithful gifts and competencies have a critical place in the over all ministry. According parity and appreciation to all the staff positions creates a congregational culture that supports all staff persons equally. This is an important justice issue and a good reminder that God calls us to honor all the parts of the body of Christ.

Not for the Faint Hearted

Some years ago, I led a subsequent DISCIPLE group with a group of six women who had completed the introductory DISCIPLE course the year before. This was the second year we were together, so we were all well acquainted.

One evening in the midst of the reflection on the text,

Lynda said to me, “I always look forward to coming to this group. Whenever I get stuck on a passage during the week, I know that I can ask about it, and you’ll tell me what it means.” I must confess that sometimes she got my best guess rather than a response I would want to publish, and I was honest about that. As an ordained elder, I have always considered it a privilege to share what benefits I can from my own education, while allowing others their own privilege to think, reflect, and differ from my point of view. I know what I know, and it’s a lot, but it certainly isn’t everything!

I had the most fun in that DISCIPLE class when I kept asking questions that required deeper and deeper thought. It was not unusual for me to push until everyone got stuck. They would throw in the towel, we laughed, and I brought the conversation to a more comfortable level. Those group members went much further than I sometimes thought they might, and it was thrilling to see them grapple with the theological issues and nuances that are too complex or too scary for the beginner or intermediate Bible class. They had a great opportunity to stretch and grow, and they did.

It’s important to have at least one study group in the church where the thorny questions can arise. If you are not the one who leads it, your support of the person who does may be the next best thing.

- Who in the current classes or in the congregation is hungry for a group with that depth, but has nowhere to satisfy that desire?
- Which class and which teacher are you cultivating to be able to nurture the advanced Bible student?
- Could you begin such a group?

Can’t Be in Two Places at Once?

During my entire local church ministry, I either had two worship services that required my presence or two (or more) churches to cover. Never in all that time was my Sunday morning schedule conducive to my presence in the Sunday school, and I didn’t do enough, way back when, to rectify that.

The biggest disappointment, at least in retrospect, was that I didn’t know the children very well. The second was that I rarely had the opportunity to observe the teachers at work. That meant that I couldn’t be present for them and also that I didn’t know how well (or poorly) they were doing. Given the importance of nurturing children in the faith, so that they can be formed well to be the present church and the future church, these two weaknesses deserve consideration. Likewise, the children need to know you.

If your schedule presents a similar dilemma,

- Are you aware of how the children regard you?
- Do the teachers know you and feel comfortable approaching you about education-related issues?
- Do you find time outside of Sunday school to be with children and teachers?

Can you create opportunities?

What’s Going on in Sunday School?

Here are synopses of some of Cokesbury’s most popular curricula. Can you find ways to connect to what some of the classes are studying in your congregation?

In **January** and **February** in **Exploring Faith**, the children will be studying Bible stories from the four Gospels that tell about people whose lives were touched by Jesus and were changed forever. When we invite Jesus to come into our lives, our lives will change too. In **January** the stories will be *The Wise Men Find the Savior*, *Mary and Martha*, *Friends of Jesus*, *Zacchaeus*, and *The Woman at the Well*. In **February**, the children will study the following stories: *The Man Beside the Pool*, *Blind Bartimaeus*, *Through the Roof*, and *The Bentover Woman*. During **March**, the children will be studying that we remember that Jesus taught about God and showed God’s love in everything he did. At Easter we remember and celebrate God’s love made known in Jesus. We can show our love for God and Jesus by loving others. In **April** Christians rejoice in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through this great gift, we come to know and understand the new life and hope that are available for us because of God’s love. The discipleship themes for the two units are *Serving Others*, *Facing Troubling Situations*, *Prayer*, and *Obedience to God*.

The **January** unit of **Bible Lessons for Youth**, “God’s Gifts of Leadership,” contains five sessions in 1 Timothy, focusing on developing gifts and answering the call to work in the world. The **February** unit, “Faithful Followers, Faithful Leaders,” contains four sessions in 2 Timothy and Titus, exploring how to trust God for strength and hope and mentoring on the faith journey. The **March** unit is titled, “The Glory of God’s Creation and focuses on Psalm 8, Psalm 104, Psalm 139, and Psalm 145. The **April** unit is “Living with Creation’s Uncertainty” and is based on passages from the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.

Adult Bible Studies for **January** will study “God’s Gifts of Leadership.” These five lessons focus on 1 Timothy, a letter that shows how the apostle Paul worked with the young pastor. The passages offer instruction for a number of goals

Other places to go for help.

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and tasks: relying on God for strength, praying, answering one's call, teaching, and working for justice and mercy. Each lesson shows how the development of these gifts for leadership is part of our faithful response to God's love.

- Finding Strength to Serve—1 Timothy 1:12-20
- Everyone Needs Prayer—1 Timothy 2:1-8
- Leading God's People—1 Timothy 3:2-15
- Set an Example—1 Timothy 4
- Practicing Justice and Mercy—1 Timothy 5:1-8, 17-24

The unit for **February**, "Faithful Followers, Faithful Leaders," has four lessons based on passages from 2 Timothy and from Titus. These lessons encourage all members of the faith community to be true to our Christian heritage, to develop Christian character, to follow a Christian mentor, and to live and teach the truth. Again, these goals are part of our faithful response to God's redeeming acts of love.

- A Heritage of Faith—2 Timothy 1:3-14
- Pursue Righteousness—2 Timothy 2:14-26
- The Marks of a Helpful Mentor—2 Timothy 3:10—4:8
- Teach Sound Doctrine by Example—Titus 2

In the spring quarter, Adult Bible Studies looks at portions of wisdom literature found in Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. The texts emphasize our life as created beings within God's larger world.

For **March**, "The Glory of God's Creation," has four lessons based on selected psalms. Lesson 1 lifts up the special qualities of human beings as part of God's creation. Lesson 2 points out other wonders in God's creation. The third lesson emphasizes the omniscient and intimate character of the God who made and knows us. Lesson 4 presents a hymn of praise to the Creator.

- God Made Us Special Psalm 8
- God Created Wonderful Things Psalm 104
- Searched and Known by God Psalm 139
- Worthy of Praise Psalm 145

In **April**, "Living with Creation's Uncertainty," has five lessons based on passages from Job and Ecclesiastes. The first two lessons retell Job's story. Lesson 3, which falls on Easter Sunday, combines passages from Job and the Gospel of Mark to affirm that the resurrection gives us a sure source of hope and victory in the face of life's tragedies. Lesson 4 continues the post-resurrection theme by combining passages from John and Ecclesiastes. It focuses on the search for meaning in life. The final lesson explores our lives as being set within "God's time" as Ecclesiastes presents it.

- Living With Tragedy Job 1-3
- When All Seems Hopeless Job 14; 32:1-8; 34:10-15; 37:14-24
- From Death to Life Job 38:1-4, 16-17; 42:1-6; Mark 16
- Where Is Peace Found? Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; John 20:19-23
- Everything Has a Season Ecclesiastes 3