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SELECTING CURRICULAR RESOURCES THAT ARE RIGHT FOR YOUR CHURCH

The best time to begin fall program planning, including choosing a curriculum, is in March, April, or shortly after Easter. Begin gathering information about the programs you have held the past year as well as all the curricular resources that have been used for implementing them. Include attendance patterns and numbers of participants and teaching teams, budget figures and information about your teaching space. The evaluation of current practices is always helpful in determining next steps.

- What materials did you use?
- Who organized and led the programs?
- How many children attended? How many youth? Adults?
- How much money did you spend? Where did it go?
- How satisfied were you with the “mechanics,” like space and timing?

Consider what went well and what didn't. The goal of evaluation is to learn what has been successful as well as what needs improvement. It can be a time to celebrate accomplishments as well as dream about future possibilities. 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 and discipleship in following Jesus Christ.

STEP ONE: Assess

Gather a team together for an annual review, consisting of:

- Pastor or clergy
- Representative of governing board such as a Vestry member or elder
- Christian Education Committee representing children, youth and adult education
- Representatives from other areas of church ministry, such as outreach, worship, pastoral care and congregational life
- A parent or two
- Include at least 2 youth representatives if programming for those 13 years and older is being discussed

Together explore the current status of Christian education in your congregation (Plan to assemble for at least 2 hours several times over a 4-6 week period):

- Sit in a circle of chairs or around a table in which everyone can see each other.
- Have newsprint, markers and tape on hand as well as pertinent information such as copies of class lists, an academic year calendar, your church mission statement and other data of importance.
- Provide a focal point with a lit candle in the center.

- Begin with a prayer, such as:
Gracious God, we give thanks for your blessings in our lives. Be present as we look upon these past months and discern the course for us to follow in the coming year. Help us to remain open to the voice and wisdom of all gathered in this circle, and may your Spirit guide us in the decisions we make for the spread of your kingdom. In your Son, Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.
- Conclude each meeting with prayer, such as The Lord's Prayer.

As a group, discuss the following questions:

1. Individually, share a story from the past year in which teaching and learning was most alive in the congregation. What allowed that to happen? What were the circumstances? Who was involved?
2. After stories have been shared, list themes and core values that were at the heart of every story on newsprint. Post for all to see and reflect upon. Are there any surprises? Confirmations?
3. Review your church's mission or vision statement. (Hopefully you have one!). How is this connected to the stories that were shared? What vision can you develop for the coming year to reflect these statements? How have your current curricular materials helped support this vision, and if not, why not?
4. Develop a series of goals and focal points for the coming year to build upon your mission statement. These can be general statements, such as "Encourage the sharing of Biblical stories in worship, classroom and home" or "Develop a sense of mission in the community and beyond."

STEP TWO: Discern

With the team, get a clear picture of your church's education needs: Together answer the following questions about your church community, noting any insights on newsprint.

- *What's your mission?*
 - What is your congregation's mission statement or vision?
 - How can curriculum support it?
- *What are your needs relative to Scripture?*
 - 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?
- *What type of curriculum appeals to you? What curriculum type best fits your church?*
 - *Scope & Sequence:* Usually lessons are grouped in units, with a balance of Old & New Testaments that loosely follow the church seasons; each age level often studies a different Biblical story with the curriculum on a 2 or 3 year repetitive cycle
 - *Lectionary based:* Follow the Sunday readings (lections) each week that are used in worship, usually focusing on the Gospel (especially at the younger age levels); all ages study the same Biblical passage or story
 - *Montessori / Worship centered:* Experiential in nature, this type of curriculum uses silence, wondering and personal response, allowing the student to learn

liturgical language with the guidance of a storyteller / teacher who shares the biblical story using hands-on materials

- *Learning Centers:* Often known as “workshop” or “rotation,” this model taps into the various learning styles in how the Biblical story is presented; students explore one story for several weeks through a variety of means such as art, music, drama, computers, cooking, science, etc.
- *What are your 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?
- *Who will be teaching?*
 - Are your teachers experienced or new?
 - What support do they need for teaching the curriculum?
- *Who will attend?*
 - 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?

STEP THREE: Evaluate

Gather and evaluate samples of several different curricula.

Divide your committee into groups of two to read and evaluate one or two age levels of a specific curriculum. Use the following questions as a guide in your research, always keeping in mind what your planning / reviewing committee have discerned over the past two meetings.

- *What is the purpose of the program?*

Does the curriculum have a foundation paper or does it list the goal of the curriculum? Does the curriculum’s goal complement the mission of your parish and education program? Do the materials in the curriculum support the goals, or are they busy work?
- *What is the content of the program?*

How is the person and work of Jesus treated? God? Holy Spirit? What is the view of the church? Of the church’s worship? Of the church in relation to individual, family and society? Does the content mesh with your church’s belief and character? Is there a denominational focus? Are contemporary issues/themes covered, and if so, how are they treated?
- *How does the program view teaching and learning?*

How are students’ abilities, interests and characteristics taken into account? What is expected of learners? Is the material age appropriate? How is the act of teaching treated? How much specific guidance (lesson plans, resources, etc.) is provided for the individual teacher? What provision is assumed with respect to teacher training? Do the materials suggest ideas for teachers’ meetings, self-evaluation, and spiritual growth?

How specifically are lesson plans developed? Are suggestions given for pre-session activity? Are patterns and activities flexible? Are activities dependent upon one another, do they continue from week to week or stand on their own? What provision is made for church-home cooperation?

- *How is the material formatted?*

Are materials issued quarterly/yearly/seasonally? Are they dated/undated? Arranged in units or individual lessons? Are there materials for teachers and students? Are they interrelated to one another? How are the materials priced? What is the expense per pupil? For a total parish? Do you need to purchase the “whole program” or can you purchase portions?

Re-gather and share your findings:

- Discuss the pros and cons of each set of materials, listing them and comparing them on newsprint if necessary.
- Narrow your choice down to two, and using the sample lesson material often provided on the publisher’s Web site, have your teachers use one of the lessons with their classes.
- Upon further feedback and reflection, make your selection!
- Making a commitment to stay with a specific curriculum for several years is important. In this way you can evaluate it’s effectiveness with children while your teachers have a sense of continuity and learn how to become familiar with it, adapting it to their own personality, teaching style and the rapport they have with those they minister to.

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