## Orientation Guide:
### Adult Sunday School Teacher

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Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You’ve purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

“Orientation Guides” are easy-to-use tools that help prepare people to take on new roles in church leadership. Each guide focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts first present an overview of the ministry and of the leadership role, including an interview with a successful practitioner (pp. 7–8). The second section provides focused, practical information to help you perform your duties.

This specific guide is designed to help you provide orientation and basic training to men and women involved in adult education and discipleship. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, examine a sample job description for an adult Sunday school teacher (p. 9) and use it as a basis to draw up your own descriptions. Consider some of the important character traits that a teacher should have when you read “What Makes a Good Teacher?” (pp. 5–6). Learn how to get your message across to a 21st-century audience when you read “Teaching That Connects” (pp. 16–17). For advice on improving your teaching skills, think about how you can implement the ideas in Howard Hendricks’s article “Becoming a Better Teacher” (pp. 18–19).

We hope you benefit from this guide as you go deeper into the important role of serving as a teacher in the church.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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Informed, but Not Transformed

Those who teach have a higher calling than simply to transfer information.

Ephesians 4:20

BY BRIAN MCLAREN

I’m an educator at heart. I love to teach. Before becoming a pastor, I loved teaching literature, writing, even grammar. In my spare time, I loved teaching music. I still love to take people into the woods and teach them about plants, birds, reptiles, weather, ecology. Anything I know, I love to share with others. Most of all I love to teach people about God, the Bible, the gospel, the Christian life.

But the word about in the previous sentence causes me pause. I don’t want just to teach people about God, about the Bible, and so on. I want to drop the preposition in the same way the apostle Paul does in Ephesians 4:20 (NASB), when he speaks of the need for people to “learn Christ,” not just learn about Christ.

When I taught people to play guitar, I wasn’t just teaching them about the guitar, how strings vibrate, what frets do, or why the grain of the soundboard is important. True, I share this information; it does have some value. But I was interested in teaching guitar.

When I taught writing, it wasn’t just information I was interested in transferring. I wanted to help my students become the kind of people who could think clearly, feel honestly, and convey those thoughts and feelings in phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. It was the same with literature. Yes, there is an about dimension, but it was always in service of the direct, transforming, empowering encounter: learning literature, learning interpretation, learning poetry.

Beyond About

This difference between learning and learning about parallels an important shift that is signaled by the change from “Christian education” to “spiritual formation.” True, in many quarters people slap a sexier new label on what they’ve always done. But elsewhere the shift in language reveals a profound shift in values, from teaching about God to teaching people God, from teaching about the Christian life to teaching people to live it, enjoy it, practice it. At its best, the change in language signals a shift in priority from transferring information to training for transformation.

This flows from a reality many pastors and church leaders secretly acknowledge but seldom verbalize: that too many of our most “educated” Christians are some of the meanest. They may know the most information about the Bible but are the least Christ-like.

Too often there seems to be a direct correlation between knowledge about theology on the one hand and arrogance, contentiousness, and an uncharitable spirit on the other.

No one is in favor of ignorance, but mere knowledge that “puffs up,” as Paul points out, isn’t much better.

In my evangelistic conversations and in my visits to a variety of churches, I am becoming more and more sure that, both for our current church attenders and for the unchurched we wish to reach, one question is increasingly paramount: Can your church help me experience God and experience personal transformation? By this question, they’re telling us they don’t just want to learn about. They want transformation. They want to learn Christ.

We have well developed curricula and structures for teaching information, but we are still quite primitive when it comes to training for transformation. But that problem is also an opportunity, for us leaders, to seek transformation ourselves, from being educators who teach about, to being spiritual mentors and trainers who first and foremost practice a transforming faith as a way of life ourselves, and have effective ways of bringing others onto a transforming path, too.

Of all the many things I am optimistic about in the church these days, this is one of the best.

—BRIAN MCLAREN is an author, speaker, pastor, and networker among Christian leaders.
**Reflect**

1. What impact should McLaren’s statement that “some of our most ‘educated’ Christians are also the meanest” have on how you go about your role as a teacher?
2. When have you experienced teaching that led to transformation? What made that teaching effective?
3. What are some ways that you would like to grow in Christ during your time as a teacher? What are some commitments you can make to aid you in the process?
What Makes a Good Teacher?

Teachers who succeed have godly characters and the desire to transform students.

Deuteronomy 11:18–21

BY LEE A. DEAN

Adult education teachers are never self-appointed. There is always a selection and supervision process of some kind, regardless of the size and structure of a congregation. What do supervisors of Christian adult education look for in their teachers, both in and out of the classroom? Read on to find out what traits these leaders are on the lookout for.

Experience in the church and as a teacher. If someone is new to your church and expresses a strong desire to immediately begin teaching a class, the best course is to instead take time and let the person become integrated with the life and mission of the church.

“We want people to connect, find relationships, get involved in ministry, and be here for a little while,” said Fred McCormick, adults pastor at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. “Then let’s have a talk about where you can begin to serve, including teaching.”

Bill Layle, pastor of spiritual formation at Kentwood (Michigan) Community Church, said teaching is not a role best suited for newcomers. He likes to take a prospective teacher to breakfast a few times as a way of getting acquainted. “Teaching in the Scripture is really an elevated position, which will require me to get to know the person,” he said.

Many adult education pastors and staff prefer to use people who have experience in a church environment. However, they also look for people who have taught in other places, such as in K-12 education or as corporate trainers. These kinds of experiences usually transfer well to a church setting.

Godliness. Teachers with godly character traits—particularly humility, honesty, integrity, and authenticity—meet a requirement that is more important than classroom experience and knowledge of the subject. A teacher has to show observable evidence that he or she is living what they are teaching instead of just telling students how they should be living the Christian life.

“You are the message,” says Layle. “Who you are is going to speak louder than anything you say. I want to be sure that you are sending the right signals.”

Willingness to support the church’s mission and goals. One component of the screening process of prospective teachers is their willingness to teach in a way that corresponds to the direction of the church. If leadership is lax on this point, the result for your church could be similar to what happens when you let a fox into the henhouse. Leadership must have the willingness to say “no.”

“There are times someone wants to teach so badly that it throws up a red flag. Maybe they want to impose on the class and on the church their thoughts on certain topical areas or biblical studies. But that is something that may not necessarily coincide with the purposes and direction of the church,” said McCormick.

An understanding of how adults learn. One common error adult education teachers make is to take the same tactics that work with children and simply transfer them to the “big people.” The audiences are quite different. Adult education leaders look for teachers who understand that adults crave information they can use.

“You can’t ask adults to memorize lists of doctrine,” said McCormick. “They want to learn truth that is immediately applicable.”

Ability to engage the class. The best adult education teachers are those who make a strong connection with their class. If students are engaged, they’ll keep coming back. The best way to lose that connection is to think that telling is the same thing as teaching.

“You can’t become a talking head,” said Layle. “You will try to get too much information across. You won’t allow the group itself to discover things. Don’t tell them what the Bible says. Ask them what they think it says. Let them get involved in the learning process.”
ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER

When McCormick observes teachers, he studies the level of engagement displayed by students when they communicate with each other and the teacher. He looks for teachers who ask questions that stimulate meaningful discussion in a particular direction.

“Teachers should recognize that discussion isn’t for the sake of discussion alone. Where does it lead? What is the purpose of the lesson and the teaching experience? We want our discussion to fulfill that purpose and function,” he said.

Have the desire to see lives changed. Adult education pastors are interested in the motivation of teachers. They want teachers who define their success by the degree that the lives of their students are transformed. This is an intangible quality and difficult to measure, yet teachers are asked to pay attention to what they see and hear from their students.

“The measure is often relational,” said Layle. “Is someone more in love with Jesus now than they were six months ago because of your teaching? Are relationships with spouses deeper and richer? With children? With co-workers? Are your friendships deeper?”

Teachers stand as examples of the Christian life; they also serve as encouragers, motivators, and mentors. When all is said and done, they should be people who can humbly tell their students, “Follow me, as I follow Christ.”

—LEE A. DEAN is a freelance writer living in Plainwell, Michigan.

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ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER

Advice From an Experienced Leader

Adult education teachers should know the Lord, their craft, and their students.
Psalm 32:8
INTERVIEW WITH RYAN PAZDUR

After graduating from Hope College in Holland, Michigan in 1997, Ryan Pazdur served as an intern at Corinth Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan. As part of that experience, he began teaching adult education classes. He stayed on at Corinth through his seminary years, and now serves the church as pastor of congregational life where his duties include equipping new teachers. Lee A. Dean, former associate editor of BuildingChurchLeaders.com, interviewed Pazdur about what goes into making a great teacher.

What are the three most important things a new adult education teacher should keep in mind?

- The goal in teaching is not just information, but transformation. It’s not only about facts, figures and details. Teach in a way that inspires and motivates people.
- Teaching is not just about creativity and effort, but also about dependence on the Lord. That frees you to focus on what you’re called to do and not to do things you can’t do.
- If you don’t enjoy teaching, your people won’t enjoy it either. If you’re not interested or passionate—or at the very least curious about what you’re teaching—people don’t get interested.

How would you advise a new teacher to prepare for a lesson?

Discern your topic and your goal for what you want to teach. It’s about discerning the needs of your people and where God’s creating a hunger. Then decide on a format that matches your material and your goal. To prepare for a single course, lay out your outline, find out how many classes you will teach, how many topics are in each class, and break it down into manageable sessions. Think of good questions, illustrations, PowerPoints, handouts, and videos. Pray every time before you go in to teach.

How can teachers create a welcoming atmosphere in their classroom?

By smiling! This always puts people at ease. Share your personal background. Invite questions. Make sure at the beginning and throughout the class that you always want people to stop you and ask questions. If all else fails, having food on hand is great. This breaks the ice and tells people that it doesn’t have to feel like school.

What should the first class look like?

Set up the big picture of why the students are there. Create a sense that this matters. That’s why I begin with an engaging story or an illustration that communicates the overall message. Be as clear and simple as you can in the first class. Don’t overwhelm them at the beginning. If the class is discussion oriented, give people a chance to know each other. They may not come back because they like you but because they relate to others in the class. That’s okay—you’re not the only teacher in the room. People in the body of Christ learn from each other.

How should teachers balance speaking and listening?

That depends on format and topic. The best thing is to keep a 50-50 balance, which includes discussion and questions. The worst thing you can do is plan to talk the whole time. You have to leave room for questions and discussion. Think of good questions if people don’t have them.

How do you keep discussions on track once they begin to wander?

It’s so easy to let people tell a story that may not relate to anything on the topic. A few people may find the diversion interesting, but the rest of the class wants to hear the material. Sometimes I’ll say, “This is a great topic and we may want to offer a class on this someday.” If not that, I might invite people to continue the discussion after class.

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What should a teacher do when someone gives a “wrong” answer or strays into territory that may be heretical?
Keep in mind that people are learning and in process. None of us have 100 percent perfect theology. You have to affirm the person. Nicky Gumbel (developer of the Alpha Course) would say, “That’s interesting. I’ve never heard that before.” That doesn’t mean you agree or disagree, just that you haven’t heard that before. Affirm that they may have a valid point, but bring it to back to, “Have you considered what Scripture says?” Don’t shut down their questions or comments. You can’t shut a person down who is in the process of learning.

What should a teacher say when he or she doesn’t have an answer to a question?
Say, “I don’t know the answer to that. I haven’t thought of that recently.” That’s where humility comes in. Write the question down and say you would like to follow up in next week’s discussion or communicate directly with that person. You’re better off admitting what you don’t know.

How can a teacher measure success?
Get a spouse or a friend whom you trust to be in the class and get their feedback. This person will be your “truth-teller.” I also invite students to share what they learned from the last week at the beginning of each class. That can be scary, but it’s a great opportunity to review. It doesn’t do any good if week after week no one remembers what you’ve taught.

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Sample Job Description

Community Church

Adult Sunday School Teacher

123 Main Street
Anywhere, State 00001 (111) 123-4567

**Job Summary**

Teachers contribute greatly to the spiritual health of Community Church. They model the Christian faith to those who sit under them, and they facilitate growth by passing on the stories and information that make us—God’s people—who we are. These teachers serve across many levels of age and spiritual maturity. Since they function in smaller settings, teachers are often on the exciting (and challenging) “front lines” of discipleship.

**Term of Service**

Sunday schools teachers are volunteers. They serve for (1) the academic year (September—May); (2) the summer term (June—August); or (3) both. Community Church’s Christian education committee coordinates teachers and teaching assignments.

**Reporting**

Sunday school teachers report to the Christian education committee, which is chaired by Community Church’s pastor of discipleship.

**Expectations**

Scripture explains that teachers fulfill a critical role in the life of God’s people. They serve as examples in both knowledge and faith. They are to be held in the highest regard. Like other leaders at Community Church, teachers must commit to the highest standards of Christian living. In accordance with Community Church guidelines for leaders, teachers are encouraged to join a fellowship group during their term of service.

**Essential Functions**

- Oversee a community of men and women interested in a specific topic, cultivating community and spiritual support within this group
- Prepare for each class by spending time in study, prayer, and planning
- Plan and present a 30-minute lesson for each week’s class; include a time for discussion within each lesson plan (or, with the approval of the pastor of discipleship, schedule an outside speaker to come to your class)
- Coordinate a time of singing and prayer each week
- Build relationships with each person in your class
- Develop relationships among members of your class and coordinate one to two outside-of-church gatherings for your group (e.g., Christmas party; group outing, etc.)
- Participate in the pre-semester planning session one month prior to beginning your term of service
- Be present and prepared to teach for at least 90 percent of the classes during your term of service. Work out any scheduling conflicts with the pastor of discipleship.
- Submit a semester’s-end evaluation to the Christian education committee
Often our Sunday schools, confirmation classes, and youth programs parallel the public education experience so that we send this subliminal message: Education is for children. The sooner you’re through with it the better.

Without slighting the importance of children and young people, I’ve always felt that the heartbeat of the church is adults. Jesus loved children, but he did not call children as his disciples. He called adults. We have no example in the Gospels of Jesus teaching children. But we have many, many stories of Jesus teaching adults.

Furthermore, it is adults who shape the world, for good or ill, and it is adult Christians who are called to be salt and light in a dying world. It is adults who vote. It is adults who work and who control the governments, schools, corporations, unions, social groups, charities, and other institutions of our society. It is adults who are called to actively disciple their own families. It is adults who decide the church’s priorities and budgets. To teach adults is to be on the firing line of Christian ministry and social change.

Consequently, when we address adults, we can address some significant issues. For example, I find that as they reach mid-life many Christian men are troubled by issues of boredom in marriage, disillusionment with the church, and suffering that seem to have no purpose.

But often they ponder these questions alone, in silence, with no one to empathize or even listen to them. In adult education, we have the important privilege of helping people understand their fears and work through tough issues with a mature biblical perspective. We can touch the throbbing pulse of human pain, anxiety, hope, and joy.

The Bible was written primarily for adults, to answer adult questions, to deal with adult problems. Adult education is vital to the church because it is our opportunity to open the Word of God, the textbook of the church, for people to whom it is ultimately addressed.

**Teaching to Adult Tastes**

Adults learn differently than do children, and I’ve found it helpful to keep in mind the unique characteristics of adult learners whenever I’ve taught adults. Malcolm Knowles, in his *The Practice of Modern Adult Education*, has given me a lot of insight here.

**Recognize that adult learners are self-directed.** Adults like to see themselves as self-directed and in charge of their own lives. But sometimes we inadvertently make them feel dependent, almost like children.

For example, when you put people in rows in a classroom, many adults feel (even if only subconsciously) that they are in a childlike setting. Furthermore, few adults will volunteer to be placed in situations where they will feel they are being talked down to or treated with condescension. When the teacher is the “expert” and the learner is “talked at,” the adult hardly feels in charge of the learning environment.

**Draw on adults’ large reservoir of experiences.** As adults grow, they learn to trust their own judgment and experience more and more, and they test what they hear from others against their own sampling of reality. If what the teacher says is not validated by and connected with their own experience, they will not take the teacher’s message seriously.

We are wise if we can put this experience to good use in the classroom. For example, once I wanted to develop a course for blended families. At first, I thought of inviting an “expert” (say, a psychologist) to teach the course. But I decided to draw on the experience of the people who might attend such a class.

So I invited some blended families to meet with me, and I asked them questions such as “What are five areas of concern for parents and children in blended families?” “What are your needs?” “Where does it hurt?” “What has been most helpful for your situation?” and “What is one thing about the blended family experience that no
one ever talks about and that you need to talk about?” “How has Christian faith helped you?” We brainstormed and were able to craft a course that had the Bible as its foundation and human experience as its structure.

**Acknowledge that adults are oriented to their tasks, roles, and identity.** This means that the learner’s identity—as parent, spouse, worker, professional, or recreational hobbyist—profoundly affects what the learner is willing to learn about. Good adult education is intimately linked to people’s image of themselves and what they see as their role in the world. An effective adult education program will integrate such concerns about roles with biblical curriculum.

**Connect the learning to life.** Probably no more than 10 percent of adults are genuinely interested in learning for learning’s sake, to know the Bible simply in order to know the Bible, to know theology or church history or Christian philosophy simply because they enjoy learning. Unlike many children and youth, adults are unwilling to store up theoretical knowledge that may or may not someday be of use to them.

For most adults, the someday of their childhood has arrived, and they want to see the practical benefits of learning today. They want information they can use now. They want connections to everyday life. So it’s harder to “market” a course on the doctrinal themes in Hebrews than a course on parenting teenagers. This doesn’t mean you avoid Hebrews, but you must connect it to questions adults are asking.

That’s not to say that adult needs should rule the classroom. Although I recognize the need to touch adults at their points of needs, most of my teaching is essentially Bible-centered. But I always try to find those crucial links between the Bible and real-world living.

—ROBERTA HESTENES is an internationally known teacher who has served as a seminary professor and college president.

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up. Planning with people helps them stay in control of the learning process, helping them address their concerns.

4. **Make adults responsible for their learning.** I avoid coaxing adults into learning. Instead, I make them responsible for the learning they want to do. I might begin a class on John’s Gospel by saying, “There are three levels at which you can take this class: Level One: You can come and receive whatever is presented. Just be willing to enter into the discussion. Level Two: As you take this class, you will read a commentary on John. Level Three: Bring a notebook and plan to do your daily devotions and meditations in John. You may even want to do your family devotions in this book.”

Then I hand out a simple questionnaire and ask people to make a commitment.

This way I get a sense of the overall character of the class. If I have a class full of people who just want to sit and absorb, I structure the curriculum to meet their needs. Other times I may have seven people who want to work with the commentary, four who are linking the class to their daily devotions, and one who actually wants to put out a graduate-level effort. It’s extremely helpful to know your audience.

5. **Help adults see learning as a lifelong endeavor.** One of my goals is to encourage a lifelong love and fascination for the subject I teach. Classes should not just stop. They should reach an emotionally satisfying conclusion yet suggest that there is more to learn.

Guided reflection on the learning process is one way I’ve brought a class such closure. I ask, “What’s the most important thing you’ve learned in this course? What is one thing you’ve learned that you intend to put into practice in your everyday life? What is one issue arising from this course that you still don’t understand?” Participants either respond verbally in small groups or write out answers on paper.

In this way, I’ve communicated clearly that we haven’t learned everything there is to know about the subject, yet I’ve helped them see what they’ve learned and what difference it will make.

This, to me, is what adult Christian education is about. It’s a dynamic, interactive process where both teacher and learners have a meaningful and ongoing relationship with each other and with biblical truth. We share a journey together, and we each come away not just better informed but truly changed.

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Teaching a Mixed Class

Both young and old Christians have the same need: a fresh encounter with God’s Word.

Hebrews 5:13–14

BY EARL PALMER

Though the benefits are great, teaching a mixed class of old and new Christians, where you can bore the mature or overwhelm the neophyte, requires skill and technique. The easy way out is to offer classes for the new believer and classes for the mature believer. And there is a place for that. But most of the time I prefer them to attend the same class together. This allows mature Christians to see younger Christians discover old truths, while new believers learn from the wisdom of older believers.

The Diverse Challenge

I believe that both a lack of knowledge and an excess of knowledge can find their resolution in Scripture. Given the chance, the Bible molds and shapes us, and remolds and reshapes us for a lifetime. Young believers have limited information. But older Christians have essentially the same problem: they have information, but they often don’t understand the information they have.

So, I have the same goal for both groups—to make the language fresh, to make it come alive, helping them discover what it means. Both groups need to see how exciting the text is, how filled with meaning it is.

I’ve found that happens especially when I let the Bible speak for itself, when I study it inductively, not coming at it with preconceived categories, but attempting to discover what it says about itself. Inductive study alone, of course, is no magic key. I still have to shape classes so that they help people see the text in a fresh way. I use a number of techniques to do that.

1. Study short passages. For example, I might play this game with my class. “I’m a Roman soldier living in the first century,” I’ll say. “Late one night, a young man with a scroll tucked under his arm comes running down an alley. He looks suspicious, so I grab for him, but he’s too quick. All I get is a little piece of his manuscript. So I take the evidence in to headquarters. They fold it neatly and send it over to the Roman CIA, Caesar’s Intelligence Agency, because they want to know what kind of a document might be carried by a mysterious runner in the middle of the night. The agent unfolds the scrap of manuscript and spreads it out under the light of his lamp.

   “Now, if you were that CIA agent and that piece of scroll—the first few verses of Philippians—was all you had to work with, what could you tell me from the document? Why was it written? What kind of people was it written to? What do they believe? What are they trying to do?”

I don’t care how much or how little Bible knowledge people have, this kind of approach creates an incredible Bible study experience. New believers have as much to work with as the older ones. Forced to concentrate on a single portion, older Christians also make new discoveries.

2. Visualize the passage. Another method I’ve used helps people see the text, literally: I have them draw or doodle.

I’m a great believer in people doodling when I’m teaching. With people sitting at a table, each with some paper, I might say, “Before we discuss this passage, make some stick men and stick women—draw a picture of what you see happening here.” This works for the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament. Paul’s epistles, for instance, are full of imagery (thorn in the flesh, crucified with Christ, running the race, etc.).

Such a procedure not only reveals the vividness of the text, it puts everyone, new believer and old, on the same level. When people are saying, “This is what I saw” or “This is what I felt,” there are no experts. There is no right or wrong answer to such questions.

Naturally, I want to take them beyond this level, because in the end the text has something to teach us. There are right and wrongs we must learn to distinguish between. But I begin by helping everyone start the journey to the deeper level from the same place.
**ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER**

3. Define the terms. One of the responsibilities of the teacher is, as C. S. Lewis put it, to tell people “what the hard words mean.” That is also a good way to teach a class mixed with new and mature believers.

How do I do that? First, I ask my 21st-century readers for their own definitions. “What do you think of when you hear that word grace?” As discussion ensues, I’m able to determine what baggage, background, and understandings people bring to the word. Then I can better compare or contrast the use of the word in its own setting.

Second, we study the use of the word in the text itself. In this way, no one can intimidate others with specialized knowledge. A skillful teacher in the inductive method can help a class see the meaning of the word 90 percent of the time by simply examining the word in its context.

For this to happen, however, we must take the time to allow the text to reveal itself. We cannot jump in to define words too quickly. I try to create an atmosphere that enhances discovery. Bible studies become boring when we don’t allow the text to develop, unfolding in a natural progression of thought.

My experience has shown me that when the average young Christian and the typical older Christian get a chance to see the text unfold in a way that’s fresh, they’re wide open to Bible study and eager for it. That’s because both the mature and the neophyte seek the same treasure: biblical truth that’s alive and fresh.

—**EARL PALMER** is senior pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington.

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Teaching That Connects
Tips for communicating truth that will change lives.
1 Peter 4:11
INTERVIEW WITH NANCY ORTBERG

BuildingChurchLeaders.com spoke with Nancy Ortberg about the challenges of teaching in the twenty-first century.

For a number of years, you served in a ministry that was focused on students and twentysomethings. How do you connect with a young, postmodern audience?
We worked really hard to be creative, intentionally provocative, and culturally relevant without losing the heart of the gospel. We tried to surprise people and make them think about God in new and unique ways. We intentionally addressed topics that we hoped would plant a seed in somebody’s mind so that they would continue to think about it during the week.

In those audiences there must have been a wide range of biblical knowledge. How do you convey a message to such a diverse audience?
The first thing you do is believe you can. Don’t make the choice to either speak to believers or speak to seekers. I think it’s possible to speak to both. Doing so causes you, the teacher, to think through the gospel. What did Jesus really mean when he said this? What does the Bible mean when it says this? What topics do we not talk about in church? And how can we tackle those really important topics?
Connecting with an audience may be as simple as saying, “For those of you that have been following Christ for a long time, here’s what you might need to think about. And for those of you here who aren’t sure what you believe—if anything—about God, here’s something you might want to think about.” By saying that, you’re authentically acknowledging that there are both kinds of people in the audience.

Once you have people’s attention, how do you keep it?
You have to think provocatively while you’re preparing the message so that you can use stories or something from your research to put a new slant on a familiar idea. When you’re speaking to people who have been following Christ or have been in church a long time, familiarity with a passage is sometimes your worst enemy. People assume that they know what a passage says and how to live it out.
Scott McKnight writes that people change in two circumstances: when they’re on a quest or when they’re in a crisis. Now, I can’t create people who are on a quest, but I can create a crisis. Part of the job of a communicator is to create a rhetorical crisis in the lives of the listeners. The stories I tell, the questions I ask, and the tension I set up should cause some cognitive dissonance in people’s minds, so that they walk away thinking about the message.

When you sense that people aren’t tracking with you, what do you do?
Good communicators learn the skill of reading an audience. You have to be able to simultaneously deliver the message and ask yourself “What’s the Holy Spirit doing in this room? What’s the energy like?” You have to be able to read the room and respond appropriately.

When you sense that you’re not connecting, you can make shifts as you talk, especially if you’ve done thorough work and research to prepare the message. You’ll be surprised how much that’s not on your paper is still in your head because of your preparation. Then just try to listen to the Holy Spirit in the moment and say, “Is there another direction that I can go?” Sometimes you just have to live with the reality that when you teach on a regular basis, they’re not all going to be homeruns.

How much do relationships between adult teachers and adult students contribute to what’s being learned in the class?
We learn most deeply from people we trust, so the relational component is crucial. I don’t want to put the burden on teachers to say that they have to go hang out with their students all the time, but teachers must be available at a relational level for people to know their teachers and for them to know their students. Also, teachers need to stay in tune with the challenges people in a church are facing. It’s too easy to become
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cloistered and give messages that completely miss where people are living. A relationship between teachers and students helps guard against that disconnect.

What can volunteer Sunday school teachers do to develop their teaching skills?
There has to be somebody guiding them and overseeing the process. You could call it a mentor or a leader. It could be another teacher. But somebody has to help with the preparation. When I first started teaching at Willow, we would brainstorm different approaches and structures for the talk ahead of time, and a number of people would listen to the talk and give me immediate feedback. Then I would make adjustments. To really improve your teaching, prepare early enough to practice your lesson on a mentor or another teacher.

We all have ups and downs in our spiritual walk. What advice would you offer a teacher that is experiencing a low point in his or her walk with God?
That’s a great question for which I have two answers: take a break or keep teaching. I don’t know which one’s right. When my husband John and I were at Willow Creek, John went through some very difficult things—mostly an internal kind of processing—for about a year and a half. I thought, He’s going to need to take a break from teaching. It’s just too much right now. But quite the opposite was true. Teaching was a haven for him. His teaching actually improved. There was an authenticity in it that deepened. It was a gift from God that his teaching continued and even deepened in its impact during that period. I don’t understand it, and I don’t think it’s prescriptive. Sometimes it’s entirely appropriate for teachers to take a break. In either case, you have to pray about it, think it through, get counsel from those around you, and then make a choice. In either case, churches ought to be gracious. While your gift is important, it’s not more important than your spiritual health.

—NANCY ORTBERG is a founding partner of Teamworx2, a consulting firm that helps organizations overcome team dysfunctions. She is most recently the author of Looking for God: An Unexpected Journey through Tattoos, Tofu, and Pronouns.

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Discuss:
1. What kinds of topics might need to be addressed in your church? How can you talk about them in a new way?
2. Who have been significant teachers in your life? In what ways does a good student-teacher relationship enhance learning?
3. How can you improve mentoring and coaching for Sunday school teachers in your church?
Most people think that the longer a person teaches, the better he or she gets. Nonsense. Just as ripping through wood dulls the teeth of a carpenter's saw, so experience tends to wear away my edge. I have found only evaluated experience sharpens my skills.

What to Evaluate
Some may fear evaluation undermines their authority. I have found, however, that inviting evaluation has precisely the opposite effect. A teacher who is vulnerable, realistic, and committed to excellence wins the respect of others. It shows personal security and strength.

It is difficult—even impossible—to evaluate some of the intangibles in ministry. But I’ve found valid criteria for determining whether my teaching is well communicated and well delivered, and whether people are finding helpful truth for their lives. Here are the questions by which I evaluate my teaching:

- **Am I reaching my ultimate goal?** I have set a twofold goal: (1) to present believers perfect in Christ, as Paul describes in Colossians 1:28–29, and (2) to equip them for ministry, according to Ephesians 4:15–16.

  I can assess that by looking at the lives of those I teach. But the number one question I ask is not “Where are they?” but “In what direction are they moving?” I find that out by getting alongside people, talking with them, finding out how they’re implementing these nuggets I’m handing out.

  I also look for attitudes, especially an increasing hunger for God and his righteousness. Are people starting to fall in love with the Lord? Is there some evidence of him in their lives? Are people being delivered from self? Are they starting to care about others?

- **Does my teaching communicate?** That’s not hard to evaluate. For one thing, if I don’t have enough illustrations to bring light into my material, it will fall short. I can look at my notes and count the number of illustrations.

  I can also look at the number of stories I tell. Narratives improve communication. Whether stories come from the Bible, my personal experience, the newspaper, or other people, I know that people won’t identify as well with my messages without them.

  I evaluate my transitions. I don’t want to fall into the trap of planning what to say but not how to say it: “Now, I want to illustrate this point, because it’s a very important point, and I was reading in the Bible the other day, and I came across an illustration out of the life of Elijah, and I want you to see it, ‘cause it’ll drive home the point.”

  In all that piffle I haven’t said anything. So I objectively evaluate whether I’ve pinpointed my transitions: “One morning Elijah’s servant awoke him early …”

  Finally, I evaluate the quantity of material I cover. I once asked on of my favorite professors how he made his lessons so strong. His reply: “I take the material, boil it down to the irreducible minimum, and then spread it over the semester.”

How to Evaluate
The more people who critique my teaching, the more evaluation methods used, the more likely I will gain an accurate and thorough picture of my effectiveness. To begin with, then, I evaluate myself briefly after every teaching opportunity, and I ask three questions.
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1. What did I do well? If I only highlight failings, my confidence suffers. I need to encourage myself with the positive, for by affirming the good I reinforce it.

2. What did I do poorly? Often the best time to pinpoint a failure is immediately after the lesson.

3. What should I change? Sometimes, for instance, I may have discovered a type of illustration or story that resonates, so I’ll plan more of the same for the future.

This only scratches the surface of the self-evaluation I do. Together with my wife I evaluate my life and ministry daily as well as doing periodic check-ups on a broader scale.

I also invite others to evaluate my teaching both in writing and verbally. Since most people don’t like saying anything negative to my face, I often use written evaluations. Verbal feedback, however, is useful, too: it’s immediate; comments can be clarified; I can read the person’s body language and so “hear” more nuances in their remarks.

Over the years, I’ve found that how I frame questions significantly affects the feedback. I ask open-ended questions (“What parts of this class helped you?”) that harvest whatever is on the evaluator’s mind, or directive questions (“Did my introduction get your attention?”) to point them specifically to issues I’m curious about.

Periodically I debrief a class. I sit down with some students over refreshments and ask what spoke to them, what they understood me to be saying, what questions they have. I’ve found this one of the more productive means of feedback.

In addition, I’ve been helped by bringing in a professional—a college speech professor, for example. He will spot things that the untrained eye would overlook, offering a sophisticated critique of the finer points of teaching.

There is a cost to evaluation, as well as a payoff. It requires time, effort, and openness. On some days it encourages me; on others, it knocks the wind out. Frequently evaluation turns up nothing new. But then come those precious, few insights that advance my effectiveness by a quantum leap.

—HOWARD HENDRICKS is a distinguished professor at Dallas Theological Seminary.

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Prayer List

Prayer is an important part of any work that involves serving the church—especially for teachers who handle the Word of God. Use this list to help focus your prayers for your needs, your students’ needs, and the needs of those in your church. Make copies and use this form throughout your term of service.

For the Church Staff and Congregation

Joys:

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Concerns:

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For My Students

Joys:

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Concerns:

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For Myself

Joys:

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Concerns:

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 11:18–21; Ezra 7:8–10; Psalm 32:8; Romans 12: 6–7; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23; 1 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 4:20; James 3:1–2; Hebrews 5:13–14
Further Exploration
Books and resources to equip those who teach adults.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.
- “Maximizing Church Membership” Assessment Pack
- “Church Job Descriptions” Best Church Practices
- “Adapting for Small or Start-Up Ministries” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Adapting to Different Learning Styles” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Adult Education” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Becoming a Great Teacher” Practical Ministry Skills
- “New Teachers” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Teaching in Smaller Groups” Practical Ministry Skills

LeadershipJournal.net: Our sister website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.


Creative Bible Teaching by Gary Bredfeldt and Larry Richards. Teaches strategies for building bridges from the Bible’s world to today’s. Also includes practical advice for planning, teaching, and evaluating a lesson. (Moody, 1998; ISBN 978-0802416445)
