

### Selecting Resources

Although it is vital that the church move beyond the myth that sees content simply as the curriculum resources we use, the resources we select are important tools for helping people learn the content that we believe is important. Even though we know that resources don't teach and that the selection of curriculum materials does not complete our responsibility with regard to the content of Christian education, to quote a proverbial wisdom, we don't want to "throw the baby out with the bathwater." Curriculum materials are important, as a part of the content we study, and we need to select them with careful thought and effort. Therefore, a brief discussion about how we go about selecting these resources seems in order.

This is also a stewardship issue for me. Over the years, I have seen denominations spend millions of dollars on the development of new curriculum materials and their promotion in the church. The newest materials become the focus of the moment, and churches spend money in acquiring these new materials, believing that these resources will be just what they need. Pretty soon, teachers begin to grumble, students don't seem to be interested, and we begin the cycle all over again. Old curriculum materials pile up in church supply closets, and we wonder if it will ever end.

I do not want to criticize denominations and their efforts in developing useful curriculum materials. We need good resources, and I am grateful to those who give time and energy to their design. But we do need to pause and recognize the amount of money that has been spent over the years on the repetition of this cycle and to ask ourselves if this is the best use of our financial resources. Are we being good stewards of that which we have been given? Is developing new curriculum materials always the answer? Is there something we might do to keep from repeating this cycle so often?

There is something we can do. We can engage in a deliberate and intentional curriculum resource selection process that will help us become better stewards in providing the resources needed to assist people in learning what they need to know. While I do not believe that this is a totally new suggestion to many of you, it bears repeating again and again in order to

encourage the church to engage in serious efforts with regard to this important issue of selecting materials. Let's take a closer look at one way we might shape such a process.

#### *Curriculum Resource Selection Process*

Like Iris Cully, I do not believe that there is "one easy way"<sup>15</sup> to go about selecting curriculum resources. However, I do believe we can take some steps that will help us engage in this important work with some intentionality, giving it the kind of thought and effort it deserves. As I have worked with seminary students and churches, a set of five important steps has emerged as basic to the selection process. I name them as follows:

- Prepare the ground
- Describe the particular situation
- Select the resources
- Use the resources
- Evaluate the resources

1. *Prepare the ground.* When I talk about the process beginning with a "preparing of the ground," I am drawing on the image of gardening. My husband is a dedicated gardener, and one of the important things I have learned from him is the necessity of preparing the ground, adding nutrients and working the soil so it is ready to receive and grow the plants. The result of such preparation is a beautiful flower garden in bloom throughout the season.

When selecting curriculum resources in the church, we also need to prepare the ground, to help the church get ready to select the kinds of materials it will use. The discussion about content that we have been engaging in throughout this chapter is a preparing of the ground. It is helping people remove some of the myths and false perceptions (like removing rocks and weeds from the soil) that can inhibit a broader understanding of content. It is helping them gain a new vision, looking at what it is that we need to know as Christians and how we need to know it. It is helping to prepare the way for the selection of resources appropriate to the task.

This working of the ground is an ongoing task. Like the good gardener whose efforts in preparing the soil are never complete, we need to regularly discuss issues of content and look at who we are as Christians and what it is that we need to know. We need to keep new myths and false perceptions from sprouting or the old ones from returning. We need to return again and again to prepare the ground.

2. *Describe the particular situation.* Before looking at specific resources, we need to describe the current situation. Again, it is like a physician making a diagnosis. She would not write out a prescription before taking the time to know who we are and to listen to us describe our symptoms. I believe that the same is true when selecting curriculum resources for use in the church. We risk making the wrong selection when we have not taken the time to describe the setting, the church, the people involved, what we need and want to learn and how, and so on.

We need to do two kinds of description in this phase of the selection process. The first is a description of the congregation and context in general. This includes describing who the people are, their needs and interests, where they are in their Christian journeys, what kinds of Christian education experiences they have had, how they seem to learn best, and so on. This also includes a description of the ways in which the congregation responds to the questions raised earlier in this chapter about what Christians need to know and how.

The second kind of description is a more focused one related to the curriculum resources themselves. In this descriptive task, we need to name the qualities that we look for in a resource, qualities that would help it be a fit for our particular congregation and its educational work. For example, there are churches that demonstrate a strong preference for a particular Bible translation. To use a Bible study resource that did not use that translation at all would probably not be a good fit and could quickly lead to dissatisfaction with that resource.

Besides the choice of Bible translation, other factors important to consider are ways in which your church likes to study the Bible (topical, lectionary, verse-by-verse, etc.), the educational approaches your teachers seem to prefer (lecture,

discussion, projects, lots of hands-on crafts, etc.), the actual conditions under which the resources will be used (length of time for the study sessions or classes, number and age range of students in a given group, etc.), the role that denominational heritage, mission, and values should play in the resources, and the kinds of aids for teaching that your teachers and students expect (teacher's book, student book, craft materials, take-home papers, etc.). Although certainly not exhaustive of the factors that we need to explore, this list gives an idea of what we need to consider and describe as we prepare to select the resources we will use.

3. *Select the resources.* Obviously, the steps already mentioned are a part of the selection process, but there comes a point when we have to choose, to actually decide on particular resources. This process begins with the gathering of a variety of possible resources. There are several sources for discovering what is available: church resource centers, denominational publishing houses, religious bookstores, other churches, and so on. My recommendation is that a church have more than one set of resources for review. This provides the opportunity to examine different approaches and offers some comparison for evaluation purposes.

After the materials are assembled, those responsible for the decision need to evaluate them. I encourage people to use the descriptions developed above as they do an initial screening of the materials. How well do the descriptions and the materials seem to match up? Following this overview, I suggest a checklist, like the following that I have developed for use with seminary students and congregations, for a more detailed analysis of the materials.

#### *An Evaluation Checklist for Selecting Curriculum Materials<sup>14</sup>*

##### OVERALL DESIGN OF MATERIALS:

1. What are the stated goals of this curriculum material? How appropriate are these goals for your church's approach to Christian education? Are they similar to the goals that you have set for teaching/learning?

2. Content:
  - a. Is the material what you want to study?
  - b. Does the biblical material reflect an acceptable approach to biblical interpretation?
  - c. How appropriate is the material in terms of its interpretation of the meaning of the Christian life?
  - d. Is the content appropriate for the students in terms of age level, developmental issues, learning abilities, and life experiences?
3. Arrangement of the material:
  - a. How is the biblical material used? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to the scriptures?
  - b. What is the structure of each session? How are the sessions related to each other? Is this an appropriate structure for your setting?
  - c. Is there space for additions and substitutions where appropriate? Are there suggestions for such additions and substitutions?
4. How would you rate the material in terms of its physical appearance? Its usefulness in terms of the skills and preferences of your teachers? Its overall appropriateness for your particular students?
5. Can your congregation afford this material? Can it be used again?

## TEACHER MATERIALS:

1. Is the format of the material attractive?
2. Are the sessions clearly outlined so that a teacher can easily understand the movements of teaching? Are there particular features that help the teacher understand the outline and its progress?
3. What kinds of teacher helps are provided? Are these appropriate and useful?
4. How well does this material match your teachers' skills?

5. What approaches to teaching are used? Are these appropriate? Are instructions for activities clear and easy to follow?
6. What resources are suggested for use beyond those provided? Which of these are essential? Which ones could be easily obtained?
7. Is helpful material about the ages, learning levels, needs, and interests of the students provided? Is there background material about the content so that the teacher's knowledge and understanding will be enriched?

## STUDENT MATERIALS:

1. From the student's perspective, is the material attractive? Is the printed material easy to read? Does the style and language attract the student's interest? Is the material within the student's understanding?
2. How are the students engaged in the learning process? Are they engaged in ways appropriate to their ages, learning abilities, needs, and interests?
3. What kinds of activities are used? Will the activities attract their interest? Will the students find these activities useful? Are these activities appropriate to the content?

## CONCLUDING QUESTION:

Weighing the advantages and disadvantages, would this be the most appropriate and useful curriculum material for your church? State your reasons.

After having used a checklist such as this, the decision is finally made about the actual resources that are to be used in teaching the content we have determined is foundational to the Christian faith.

4. *Use the resources.* Too often in the church we think that our task of selecting resources is completed when we have made the decision about what materials we will use. Because of this,