

Preliminary Thoughts on a New Approach to Adult Education

My church is experimenting with a new approach to adult education. As mentioned in the previous post, we have age group classes with rotating teachers. The difficulty we've faced has been maintaining consistently high quality.

This isn't for lack of talent. We are blessed with an abundance of teaching talent, with many members having advanced Bible degrees or being former fulltime ministers. But these men are busy with family and work and are often reluctant to come up with a weekly lesson plan for even one quarter a year.

Another one of our problems is that the standard has gotten to be very high. Being a fairly large congregation (around 700 on Sunday morning), we sometimes have some truly extraordinary classes, and this makes it hard to recruit. Sometimes even a good teacher sees his class dwindle as an even better teacher is holding forth in the next classroom. More talent means higher expectations.

In fact, this has led to the problem that many of our "age group" classes have students who aren't remotely a part of that age group. Members feel privileged to follow a favorite teacher, and while this is no great sin, it can interfere with the social dynamics of the class. There's a real value in having continuity in a class, to build friendships and to help support the small group program.

As a result, this quarter we've asked all the teachers to teach the same material and to attend a class on Wednesday night to be taught by a "master teacher" who will prepare them for the following Sunday. The master teacher brings a lesson outline and the teachers all sit down and talk through it. Ideas are shared and critiqued. The master teacher often revises the outline based on the discussions and emails the improved outline to the teachers that night or the next day.

Meanwhile, the teachers are allowed prepare their own lessons and aren't required to strictly follow the master teacher's outline. Teachers have to teach in the way they feel comfortable.

The master teacher spends Sundays visiting the classes to provide feedback to the newer teachers. He is also available to substitute—he's already prepared and can fill in on very short notice.

We're now nearly through the first quarter, and the department leader has recruited teachers for the next quarter. The early results are—

- The department leader has been able to recruit two excellent faculties. Men seem very willing to teach when they are supported in this way.
- The membership seems very pleased with the quality of the teaching. The average quality is reported to be up.
- Attendance is higher—although not greatly.

- The teachers seem to enjoy it. Some prefer to work entirely on their own, while others very strictly follow the outline, and others are somewhere in between—but all like having the help.
- The department leader has to come up with only one topic for the quarter, rather than eight, and so has a little more time to work on the pastoral side of things.
- Students appear to be more willing to stay in their natural classes, although we still have some students moving to follow a favored teacher.

On the other hand, we've already decided to go back to our old system for the summer. Some classes have special needs that can't be met in this system—marriage enrichment, parenting, financial management, empty nest issues, and such can only be handled this way.

There are still a few unanswered questions, such as—

- How will this work when we take on very difficult, very controversial topics? Can we find enough teachers who can handle the most challenging material?
- How will the teachers respond over the long haul? This is very far removed from our traditions, and so early results might be misleading.
- Can we managing the classes pastorally through this method? This has always been a struggle, due in part to the shifting attendance patterns.

We are not the first to try this, and some other congregations have done this for quite a while. I would be very interested in learning how they feel about their experiences.