

## CHAPTER THREE

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### TEACHER TRAINING

Wouldn't it be great to have every staff position in your church filled? In fact, since we're dreaming, let's add a willing substitute to each department. But wait a minute, while staffing is important, staffing with trained workers is more important. In fact, poor teachers may hurt a church more than shortage of teachers. *Any warm body won't do!*

Any warm body won't do, because *students need to learn God's Word*. In the Scriptures there is life, and children, teens and adults must be ignited this biblical truth. A poor Sunday School teacher will hinder learning by boring students with the Bible. Rather than seeing a living message, they are turned off by irrelevant lessons that are poorly communicated.

Any warm body won't do, because *teachers need fulfillment in their ministry*. Workers who lack confidence or feel incompetent do not experience joy in their service. If they feel ineffective with their students, unable to motivate them with the Scriptures, they become discouraged. But teachers who know their subject matter, use appropriate methodologies and have good rapport with students find their classroom experience a highlight of each week. Training leads to competence, confidence and joy in service.

Training helps *new teachers* understand effective means of instruction. It shows them how to orchestrate the classroom environment and how to handle classroom control. Training offers practical insights on what works, and doesn't work, to make learning come alive for students.

Training also helps *veteran teachers* stay fresh in their approach. Creatures of habit fall into ruts; they gravitate to that which is comfortable. Systematic training exposes even tenured teachers to new formats or methods that can add freshness to their classrooms. This new enthusiasm for teaching, in turn, heightens student interest in the class.

Many churches try teacher training, but get frustrated with their attempts. As one pastor noted: "We have difficulty getting adult Sunday School workers to realize their need for teacher development. While many have a good grasp of the Bible, they are ineffective in communication skills."

Another pastor lamented: “Our board feels that teacher training is paramount, but our training sessions are not well attended because teachers do not see training as important.” Yet another minister expresses it this way: “Teacher training and motivation continues to be a difficult part of my job. Too many have the attitude that a nominal effort will produce good results. However a nominal effort only produces nominal results and a poor education program of the church.”

While experiences such as these are prevalent among churches, they are not universal. Though some congregations are struggling with their training programs, other churches are having success in teacher development. There will always be some resistance to trying new things (training), and people’s schedules will always be full. Nevertheless, a church with a comprehensive game plan for training will help its teachers improve in their ministry skills. A comprehensive approach to teacher training includes meaningful content; high expectations; a variety of formats; a spirit of camaraderie; sufficient finances and a coordinator of training.

### ***Meaningful Content***

Time is a precious commodity. Since people value their time, they will not waste it on trivial meetings. If a teacher is required to attend a training session, then the program better be worthwhile. Each meaningful training experience lends credibility to the training program. Each meeting that does not have a meaningful content will erode participation. Because of human nature and our fast-paced life, the erosion process moves more quickly than the building process. Programs that minister personally to teachers, and help them better minister to others, will stimulate regular participation.

Training for teachers should address a number of concerns.

Topics worth reviewing include:

- The teacher’s spiritual life.
- Developing teaching confidence and competence
- Becoming a better student of the Bible
- Understanding our learners
- Maximizing student involvement
- Appropriate teaching methods
- Moving from explanation to application
- Classroom control
- Extending the teaching session beyond the classroom
- New resources for communication
- Measuring teaching effectiveness

When each training session is a winner, teachers are more likely to return for further growth. They are also more likely to enthusiastically

promote the program to any who missed the event. Meaningful content fosters teacher receptivity for ongoing training.

### ***A Variety of Formats***

There are many means available to a church for developing its teaching staff. The training formats selected by a congregation will vary according to the needs of its teachers. If workers show that they need help in lesson planning, then monthly team meetings can assist them. If a number of teachers are having difficulty with a common problem (e.g., classroom discipline), then a larger group training event is appropriate. If the staff needs motivation, then a local seminar or guest speaker would be beneficial. A variety of formats exist for accomplishing teacher training.

The *monthly team meeting* is the backbone of any teacher improvement program. A typical team meeting brings together three to six members who work in a specific ministry. For example, the group may be the women who work with the elementary girls' club, or the couples who work in the twos-and-threes Sunday School. These teams usually meet once a month to evaluate past programs, review student needs, plan next month's activities and study specific teaching techniques.

- *Planning* is the predominant feature of a monthly meeting. Based on their understanding of learner needs and lesson objectives, teachers can decide "who will do what" for the upcoming class sessions. For example, workers in the fours-and-fives class can decide who will tell the story, who will work at each learning center and whether Bible activities will be in large or small groups. Those working in the club program might decide who will handle the recreation, who will lead the group time and who will hand out the awards. A well-run program is one that is well-prepared.
- *Training* occurs (almost subliminally) as teachers plan together by following the suggestion in their teaching manuals. Specific training can also be structured into the monthly session. Workers can view a video of a model lesson, they can discuss a good magazine article or they can study one aspect of the teaching-learning process.
- *Prayer* is also an important feature of the department meeting. Members in some teams take time to each share a ministry concern and a personal concern. Then each worker prays for the person on his or her right. Over a year (or several years) the team grows close to one another. Their ministry is more than an assignment; it becomes a spiritual boost and warm fellowship.

*Annual in-house training* provides opportunity for the church's entire teaching team to expand their learning skills. For example, Biscayne Church conducts training for its entire staff on four Thursday nights in July. Calvary Church schedules five training sessions throughout the year, calling it the "5-

50 Protection Plan". A number of churches schedule an all-day workshop on a Saturday. A typical schedule might look like this.

8:30 Registration, Beverage, Rolls

9:00 General Session

10:30 Session One

11:45 Lunch

12:30 Session Two

1:45 Break

2:00 General Wrap-Up (or Session Three)

A format like the one above combines both inspiration and instruction. A resource person could lead all four sessions, or one or more of the sessions could be used for stage-graded or topical electives. A quality in-house training experience will benefit from the following suggestions:

- Plan well in advance (12 months).
- Get the most qualified and stimulating speaker possible, from as close a distance as possible (reduced travel expenses can be added toward a worthy honorarium).
- Announce at team meetings that participation is required but also contact each teacher individually.
- Prepare name badges ahead of time, with extra badges available for those who may show up unannounced.
- Monitor room arrangements and equipment needs (adequate seating, room temperature, projectors, handouts, etc.).
- Make certain that refreshments and lunch are of good quality, and are served on time.
- Following the seminar, send notes of appreciation to the staff for giving valuable time to sharpen their teaching skills.

*One-on-one training opportunities* are profitable for assisting individual teachers with specific needs. Frequently it is the personal touch that makes one business thrive over another. Similarly, personal interaction with teachers not only gives special guidance, but it also strengthens the relationship between leader and worker. Together they may view a video teaching session, stopping periodically to discuss what is taking place. Or they might meet over coffee to consider a student's needs, or a classroom situation that keeps occurring.

Program leaders who spend time each week reading good periodicals and books are in a position to pass on some of their gleanings. For example, a teacher may offer: "Let me give you this booklet on building esteem in children. After you read it, let's get together and talk about it." A short book or timely article is usually well received by teachers. The one-on-one approach makes the worker feel: "My leader really does care about me and my teaching responsibility."

While large-group training helps many people with relatively little of a program leader's time, mentoring uses a maximum amount of the leader's

time, but in the long run produces a well-trained, well-cared-for teaching team.

*Observations* are insightful vehicles for training. Teachers benefit from the observation of other classrooms (decorations, layout, resources, table arrangements, etc.) and procedures (how the story is told, activity pages, learning centers, guided conversation, etc.).

Observations of competent teachers in one's own church are profitable. Program directors can also make arrangements for observations of excellent teachers in other congregations (an ongoing reciprocal practice can be established among several churches). Teachers can grow in their own skills by observing what is happening in other learning environments.

*Evaluations* are another good tool for teacher development. Assessments of classroom demeanor provide an objective view of teaching strengths and weaknesses. Listening to a cassette recording of one's own teaching is the least threatening type of observation. Teachers can consider their instructions (were they clear?), their methods (were they appropriate?), their students (were they involved?) or their goals (were lesson objectives reached?).

Several churches have followed a program whereby annual evaluations are part of their training format. In these congregations teachers are recruited knowing they are expected to participate in both observations and evaluations. While many teachers are anxious about outside observers, most will find the evaluation process helpful once they have tried it. (For a fuller discussion of teacher evaluation, including forms for assessing the teaching-learning process, see my *Trouble Shooting Guide to Christian Education*.)

*Christian education conventions* have been a part of the teacher development scene for several decades. While the quality of conventions varies from region to region (and sometimes from year to year), they have remained a good source for teacher training. The typical area-wide convention serves two purposes: 1. It is highly motivational and 2. It is practically instructional.

Christian education *conventions are motivational* in a couple of ways. First, the general sessions are usually led by noted Christian educators, chosen because their enthusiasm for teaching is contagious. Second, the participation of many churches together helps workers see that they are part of a larger picture. The gathering of hundreds of teachers for training is in itself highly motivational.

Sunday School *conventions are also instructional*. Scores of "how to" sessions give teachers practical ideas applicable to their own class situations. Courses such as "Understanding Preschoolers," "Music in the Sunday School," "Discipling Teens," "Building the Adult Department," and even "Making the Library Effective" are typical convention workshops.

Christian education congresses are relatively inexpensive. Program coordinators and workshop leaders usually donate their time. Publishers that

send consultants to advertise their latest products also make them available to teach a few workshops. A typical registration fee might be \$15 compared to \$60 for a professional seminar.

A drawback of these conventions is the conflicting concepts sometimes presented by the volunteer leaders. The following experience illustrates this lack of unified philosophy of education. A preschool teacher attended one workshop where the instructor emphatically stated that good teachers should be able to keep children's attention focused on a story for thirty minutes. At the next session a different leader discussed the importance of using a variety of methods, "because young children do not have long attention spans." While this type of inconsistency is infrequent, it is a possibility with a diversity of leadership.

In general, the local Christian education convention is a beneficial means of providing training for a church's Christian education workers. The financial cost to the church is minimal, and the planning time investment of the program directors is almost nil. With convention dates publicized well in advance, teachers (and even prospective workers) can make themselves available for this training opportunity.

*Regional seminars* are additional off-campus opportunities profitable for teacher development. For example, the Walk Thru the Bible seminars help teachers with an understanding of the Old and New Testaments. Seminars are also conducted by large churches, such as Willow Creek's Promise Land workshops.

Many Christian colleges and seminaries offer *continuing education classes* (as well as regular credit courses) that are open to non-degree students. Teachers find participation in these class settings very stimulating. The quality of instruction and the caliber of students make these credit courses thoroughly enjoyable.

### ***High Expectations***

An interesting phenomenon takes place in many congregations. New people attending a church may at first go to all the services. But after several weeks they begin to disappear at the lesser attended meetings. It's as if the new folk look around at the smaller crowds and come to the conclusion, "I guess we're not supposed to be here after all."

A similar experience can occur in some training programs. The meetings may have meaningful content, but absenteeism drains the enthusiasm of the entire team. It is important, therefore that program directors expect 100 percent participation at training events. If a training meeting is worth having then it's worth requiring the presence of every worker.

The first place to instill the expectation of total participation is in the recruitment process. The job description should explicitly state that teachers are expected to participate in all team meetings and training events. The purpose for these meetings should be explained to the prospective teacher, and reviewed with continuing teachers when they re-sign their annual commitments. Teachers who have been negligent in training (without valid excuses for their absence) should not be reappointed for another term of service. Remember, any warm body won't do in the great cause of teaching God's Word to God's people.

While high expectations increase teacher involvement, unrealistic expectations dampen it. For example, Brookdale Church scheduled a major training emphasis each fall, but it also required attendance at weekly team meetings. Each Wednesday evening teaching teams met together to plan the following Sunday's lesson. Though some churches experience success with this format, Brookdale felt it had a negative long-term effect on their volunteers. Their climbing student-teacher ratio (25:1) illustrated their staffing difficulties. Two commitments a week (Sunday teaching and Wednesday planning) kept some teachers from personally being fed. This neglect, in turn, led to burnout and hindered retention.

A more realistic approach to training might include one or two large training events per year, with team meetings monthly. Early scheduling of the larger events is a must, for it will encourage the maximum number of people to attend these important opportunities. Monthly planning meetings can be scheduled whenever it is convenient for the individual teams. It's a rare group of three to six people who cannot coordinate their schedules for a one to two-hour meeting per month.

Since credibility is built by consistency, only in extreme circumstances should a training event be canceled. A high expectation for regular attendance at both team meetings and larger training events fosters greater teacher participation.

### ***Spirit of Camaraderie***

The teachers at Los Altos Community Church demonstrate a deep commitment to training. While their good participation over the years is related to the high quality of training provided by the leadership, there is another subtle ingredient at work at Los Altos—the teachers like each other.

Volunteers will usually attend a training session that appears meaningful. They are even more likely to participate if their friends are also going. A program that has a genuine camaraderie among its teachers finds its workers willing to meet on a regular basis, while the program that is experiencing tension among its teams will find its workers resistant to (or absent from) group meetings.

A healthy team spirit begins with the program leader who displays the attitude: “You people are the greatest—I really enjoy being with you.” Then as teachers develop into caring teams, their monthly department meetings move beyond mere lesson planning. Decorating bulletin boards changes from a chore to a creative activity; discussions on students switch from negative complaining to positive strategies and intercessory prayer. A spirit of camaraderie is a subtle, yet essential, component of any training emphasis.

### ***Sufficient Finances***

We are all familiar with the expression, “What’s the bottom line?” Most meaningful ministries incur a program cost, and this is true for an effective teacher training program. Sufficient finances are necessary for books, CDs, videos, speakers, registration fees and recognition banquets.

Several times I have been asked to identify the most important contribution that I made to the church education program at Trinity Church. Jokingly, yet with an element of seriousness, my response has been: “I doubled the discipleship budget in the first three years.” In actuality, the most important contribution was the building of positive team attitudes; yet even those attitudes could not have been cultivated without adequate resources. The cards, pamphlets, and even books sent to teachers as expressions of appreciation were made possible because of the healthy budget. Seminar fees were underwritten and appreciation banquets were first-class—all because of sufficient funds for teacher development.

I am amazed that many churches establish a conference/training account for their pastor, yet budget little or no money for the training of volunteers. The pastor has already attended three or four years of seminary, but the lay person has had little or no theological training. The pastor only preaches thirty minutes each Sunday, while teachers have up to sixty minutes for instruction. Who has the greatest need for conferences and training? A church that takes seriously its educational task must also accept the responsibility to budget generously for effective training.

### ***A Coordinator of Training***

Which of the teachers in your church have led people to Christ? Who are the ones with a good understanding of the Bible? How many have participated in a Sunday School convention, or attended a training seminar? Which teachers do a good job with classroom control? While program leaders might be able to answer these questions about their own classes, it is a rare congregation that knows all of its people this well. Yet effective training

takes advantage of the expertise of one another, and this necessitates coordination.

Too often people view training as something leaders do with teachers. But leaders are not the only ones equipped to give helpful assistance. Some of our teachers are great storytellers; others are up to date technologically. Some are good discussion leaders; and some rarely have classroom discipline problems. A coordinator of training can help teachers with specific needs by putting them in contact with other workers who have demonstrated competence in those areas. Teachers are capable of training teachers, but a systematic utilization of their strengths requires coordination.

The coordinator of training is not responsible for planning all training emphases. Program directors should supervise the activities of their department, including training opportunities. The role of the coordinator is to serve as an assistant (or resource person) to the leaders. The coordinator maintains the data base that records: (1) the teacher's training involvement (books read, tapes listened to, classes observed, and workshops attended); and (2) the teacher's strengths (skills to share with others).

Current data for each teacher (active or former) is essential for the coordinator. As program directors channel teacher information to the coordinator, files are updated regularly. As teachers request resource suggestions, names of gifted colleagues are recommended to the teacher.

A coordinator of training will not make or break a Christian education program. However, a coordinated effort to match teacher strengths with other teacher needs is another way to maximize a church's training emphasis.

### ***Conclusion***

For years Redeemer Church struggled with its Sunday School. Student participation was sporadic, and teacher turnover was great. Occasionally they would try a special emphasis which would bring out some new children, but after the hype was over, so were the new-comers.

When Pastor Jensen came to Redeemer, he had a different strategy for the school. Numbers were not his primary concern. His desire was to see Redeemer offer the best Bible education in town. His commitment to a quality discipleship ministry necessitated some program and facility changes, but primarily his energy was channeled into developing a well-trained group of teaching ministers. Through proper recruitment, good team-building and regular training, Bible-learning came alive in the congregation.

Today Redeemer Church is still struggling in its Sunday School, but the problem is different. Now there is a shortage of space because of all the new people who have come to the church. A competent teaching staff, excited about the Scriptures and their students, has produced what a dozen

gimmicks could not generate. Pastor Jensen recognized that “any warm body won’t do”—especially in the high task of communicating God’s life-changing principles. And today the people at Redeemer share his vision and commitment.

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## **A Checklist for Training**

Does our church have...

- Meaningful Content
- A Variety of Formats
- High Expectations
- A Spirit of Camaraderie
- Sufficient Finances
- A Coordinator of Training