

Growing in faith through lifelong learning

Adult education prepares Presbyterians to put faith into action.

BY ZETA TOUCHTON LAMBERSON

Ginny Spain, a mother of three, had been teaching children's Sunday School for years and thought that was good enough to help her grow in her faith. But when she joined a weekday Bible study at her church several years ago, she discovered what she had been missing.

"Peeling back the many layers of Scripture and listening to all different viewpoints in an open and nonjudgmental atmosphere really allows me to look at Scripture in a whole new light," says Spain, a ruling elder at Macland Presbyterian Church in Powder Springs, Georgia. "Education is the backbone of our faith; it builds up and supports our beliefs and convictions. Surrounding ourselves with other Christians who are also growing and learning helps us to

grow as well. It has made such a difference in my life."

The ability to make a difference in people's lives is at the heart of Christian education.

The most successful Christian education for adults incorporates three elements: Bible study, opportunities to explore our beliefs and how they shape our lives, and chances to put faith into action. The latter is the key to energizing young adults and drawing more adults into adult education. People want to be involved in ministry, not just to hear about it.

What is different for adult education in the 21st century is the variety of ways we can provide resources to adult learners. With the proliferation of digital technology, congregations need to broaden their focus from simply creating programs to curating resources that are available at the flick of a finger. Congregations that develop a list of recommended websites and theologically sound studies along with varied opportunities for adults to gather, talk, learn, and serve together will see the fruits of their labors.

Likewise, technology now allows adult learners to interact in a wide range of innovative ways. Blogs allow participants to join discussions as their schedules permit. Skype and similar technologies enable group members to join a discussion even when they cannot be physically present. Educational materials can be emailed, and classmates can post comments or questions on Facebook.

Adults who participate in educational offerings are drawn in by several things. They want

choices. They want to discuss what matters to them. Adults also learn in a variety of ways, so catering to different learning styles is important. Christian adults yearn for community where they can share their struggles and joys and develop relationships with other Christians. An atmosphere of openness, where ideas can be shared and faith discussed, fosters community. And a congregation well formed in its faith stands a much better chance of making a positive impact in the wider community.

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Association of Presbyterian Church Educators

The Association of Presbyterian Church Educators offers various resources, including the online magazine *APCE Advocate*, which offers helpful information for church educators. APCE also sponsors an annual event with workshops that explore new models for adult education. For more information on this event or APCE resources:

apcenet.org

LEARN MORE

Theocademy: video lessons providing online theological education, including a series that helps ruling elders and deacons in their ministries. A project of the Synod of Mid-America and its partners, including three PC(USA) seminaries, Theocademy strives to provide Presbyterians with the "finest theological education they can get short of attending one of our 10 seminaries." To learn more: theocademy.com

The Thoughtful Christian: an ecumenical website from the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation offering downloadable studies on various topics, plus other resources. To learn more: thethoughtfulchristian.com

PC(USA) adult curricula

- ***Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding***, a series of biblically based minicourses that enhance adults' understanding of Reformed theology. Each six-session study includes Scripture, a prayer, in-depth commentary, and questions for reflection.
- ***Engage***, a three-part series centered on evangelism. The three studies explore the gospel, discipleship, and mission. (See page 19.)
- ***Feasting on the Word***, a quarterly, lectionary-based curriculum that connects education and worship. A related resource, *Joining the Feast*, is available for pastors and worship leaders.

• ***The Present Word***, a quarterly curriculum that invites study groups to a deeper relationship with God. Discussions and activities encourage participants to live out their faith.

For more information on these and other curricula, go to pcusa.org/curriculum, call the Congregational Ministries Publishing helpline at 800-728-7228 x8100, or email curriculum@pcusa.org.


The Presbyterian Publishing Corporation offers a number of book series that make for great studies and discussions: wjkbbooks.com. Many Presbyterian Mission Agency ministries have also produced Bible studies, such as the Presbyterian Hunger Program's *Just Eating? Practicing Our Faith at the Table*: pcusa.org/justeating.


Steps to revitalize adult education

- **Evaluate your context.** What is offered? What works? What is missing? What resources are available? Where and when does adult education happen—and where and when could it happen?
- **Survey your congregation and find out where their interests and passions lie.** Identify areas of common interests—spiritual practices, ethical issues, or theological questions, for instance—and create programs centered on those interests.
- **Be creative with scheduling.** Sunday mornings will work for some, but others might prefer options during the week. Find out what works for your people, and schedule accordingly.
- **Identify leaders** in your congregation and community and offer training.
- **Invite leaders and students to evaluate every program** they participate in. Ask for recommendations for future topics and leaders.
- **Network with adult education leaders** by attending presbytery educator gatherings, Association of Presbyterian Church Educators Annual Events, and other Christian adult education conferences.

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Help from PC(USA) Educational Ministries

The PC(USA) Educational Ministries area offers various kinds of help to Christian educators, including an online resource center and assistance in choosing educational resources. For more information, go to pcusa.org/education or call 800-728-7228 x5166.



Distance learners attend two-week intensive classes every January and August at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Iowa.