

Encouraging Teachers

It's that time of year when we are gearing up to begin Church School and programs in our churches. It's also a time of gathering leaders for training and support to start the year off with everyone fresh, with renewed energy after a summer hiatus.

Before we get too ambitious and try to do everything suggested in that pre-designed lesson plan, here are a few tips to share with your teachers to keep them grounded in what they CAN do in the limited time usually given on Sunday mornings:

Focus on learning rather than teaching

Focus on the student (child, youth, adult) and not the lesson plan. Encourage conversation and slow the pace of the class to cover one topic thoroughly rather than rush students through everything in an effort to "get it all in."

Less is more

It is better to concentrate on one idea and treat it thoroughly rather than try to cover so much that no one remembers what the lesson was about. Most Sunday School curricula load children with busy-work rather than provide teachers with ideas on how to get their students thinking.

Emphasize understanding over rote memorization

The most common religious education mistake is to enforce memorization in place of learning. Memorization has its place, but should not be the focus or goal of our education program. Forced memorization tends to be boring, tedious and often creates resentment. It is much more important that our children learn to handle and work with concepts rather than be forced to memorize prayers, scripture, or creeds.

Make students think

This needs to be one of our primary goals along with teaching children the Biblical Story. In order to be responsible, active and proactive Christians, our children need to learn to think for themselves and to think critically. Rather than be handed "sacred texts" and told to obey them, our students should be encouraged to interrogate those texts, take them apart, question them, and thus, enter into them.

Use active learning and interactive teaching

Ask open-ended questions. Ask follow up questions. Wait for student answers - establish

“think time” by having a few moments of silence for students to think about the question, for shy students to muster courage to respond, for bolder students to decide to risk their answers, or have students write their answers first. Don’t evaluate student’s discussion responses. Discussion is just that – discussion. To encourage all to participate with responses, make sure you are not affirming one answer over another.

Encourage questions

Yes, yes, yes! They are not interruptions, but teachable moments. “Yes” or “no” questions chill conversation. “Why” questions open up conversation.

“Let’s Look at This”

Jesus wanted people to think. In Matthew, Jesus is a teacher who opened the scriptures. Even if you are not a biblical scholar (and most of us are not), just teaching children how to ask questions and that asking is alright is a tremendous accomplishment. You will learn along with your students, so the one and only requisite for teaching is a love of learning. If you sat unprepared with a group of fifth graders and said, “Let’s look at this” you would do **more** than coming prepared with glue, paper, and a host of your curriculum’s activities.

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