Checklist of Adult Literature Characteristics

Does the literature...

- reflect the conviction that “The Holy Bible...has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter”?
- include beliefs important to Baptists?
- reflect sound principles of biblical interpretation?
- include sound biblical commentary?
- encourage evangelism?
- include a systematic study of Scripture so that all parts of the Bible are examined, not just a few selected portions?
- include biblical commentary that treats variant interpretations factually and fairly?
- include only authors who are trusted Baptist leaders in Texas and beyond?
- connect with Baptist ideals?
- appeal to the broad range of the church, not just the theologically and educationally elite?
- include a variety of teaching methods and appropriate use of adult learning approaches?
- include only readable print sizes - no small print?
- point to the Bible as the main curriculum material?
- reflect the church's decision about dated literature, undated literature, or a combination of the two?
- include only material which is usable by all leaders, including those who have not attended college?
- provide an attractive, easy-to-use format?
- include both male and female writers?
- lend itself to ongoing leader training?
- include only writing which is developmentally appropriate for adults?
Include a systematic study of Scripture so that all parts of the Bible are examined, not just a few selected portions.

Include biblical commentary that treats variant interpretations factually and fairly - never in a derisive fashion.

Be written by trusted Baptist leaders in Texas and beyond.

Connect with Baptist ideals. Some adult curriculum materials minimize doctrinal and biblical differences among believers so that they might appeal to a broader audience.

Include other Biblical/theological criteria adopted by the church.

**Adult Education Criteria**

The adult Bible study literature should:

1. When using quarterly, dated literature, it is desirable to appeal to the theologically and educationally elite. Be developmentally appropriate for adults.

2. Teachers should be regularly trained to use curriculum materials, so they might not set those materials aside and use their own libraries exclusively.

3. Offering multiple undated studies in a department may tempt adults to move from their existing classes to classes having topics that appeal to them.

4. If a class wants to move from one curriculum choice to another, they should consult with the Adult Christian Education Committee, minister of education, adult division director, or other appropriate leader.

5. Adult leaders should consider the possibility of rivalry and low teacher morale when one class is allowed to have curriculum choices, while others are not.

6. A church should consider empowering the Adult Christian Education Committee or another appropriate group or individual to serve as the final arbiter in making curriculum decisions.

7. The adult teacher should be a bridge builder, connecting the materials to his or her class’s needs.

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This literature evaluation guide is a revision of the original manuscript written by Jim Walter, retired Baptist seminary professor of adult education and aging, former Baptist adult Sunday School national consultant, and former Baptist church staff member. His e-mail address is jbsd@juno.com.

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**How to Evaluate Literature for Adults**

**Churches are changing...**

Bible study literature choices are increasing... so how do you choose the right literature for your church?

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Here’s help:

Twenty years ago most Southern Baptist churches used quarterly, dated curriculum from the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. But in the intervening years we have seen an explosion of new materials offered to churches. In addition, denominational ties have loosened. The influence of non-denominational or evangelical churches cannot be overlooked. Leading churches in the nation have adopted new understandings of the nature of adult Sunday School as well as the materials studied in the churches. Apparently changing the name from Sunday School has changed the mission and nature of adult Bible study ministries as well.

Furthermore, an increasing number of Baptist adults are saying that they will only give one hour a week to Christian education - Sunday morning - if they think about it. They have come to believe that they need and want other biblical and theological curriculum decisions.

**Deciding on the Nature and Purposes of Sunday School**

Since these variations have appeared in adult Sunday School, churches must pay renewed attention to the way they think about the nature of adult Sunday School, as well as the standards used to evaluate the Bible study materials they choose. Adult Sunday School leaders should determine or reaffirm the purposes and nature of Sunday School before making curriculum decisions.

“Being different” in curriculum choices may not be better in and of itself. It may be worse! Decide the nature of your Sunday School group using these questions:

- Is it designed for the entire range of experiences - from pre-Christians and young Christians to more experienced believers - or are the materials only appropriate for Christians?
• Are adult classes open or closed? Do classes expect and welcome non-Christians? Does the teacher regularly explain how one can become a Christian in the class? Is it clear that a church member or non-believer can enter the class at any time (open group) rather than at the beginning of the study unit only (closed group)?

• Are fellowship and improving relationships among members and prospects (1) less important, (2) as important, or (3) more important than Bible study?

• Does the church set aside at least one hour for class Bible study?

• Does the church provide funds for adult Sunday School classes?

• Does the pastor regularly support the Sunday School in the church newsletter?

• Do the pastor and other church staff members see the Sunday School as an active evangelistic tool, or mainly for growing believers?

Choices, Choices, Choices

Thirty years ago a researcher proposed that adults who had choices in curriculum and groups (male, female, couples) enjoyed adult Sunday School more than adults who did not have any choices. He was an early advocate of the non-traditional approach himself. The results of his dissertation research surprised him. There was no correlation between students making choices and their satisfaction with their adult Sunday School experience. It seems that the determining factor was the teacher! Don’t minimize the importance of the teacher as the primary factor in the “curriculum.” Poor teachers can take reliable curriculum materials and turn them into undated materials after this excursion. This meant that the teacher had to find reliable curriculum materials based upon the Bible, devise his own teaching strategy, and provide member materials.

Undated choices have limitations. For instance, a church decided to teach The Prayer of Jabez during June and July. The teachers agreed to do this because they were interested in the study. But the sessions rapidly dwindled because all members did not buy the book, some did not read the assigned chapter for the week, and the teacher did not have any teaching helps. So the sessions focused on the teacher’s lectures and an occasional question or two. In most cases the church which has undated materials depends on individual, not group planning.

Sometimes churches move to undated or elective approaches because they:

1. don’t realize the value of the materials they already have;
2. are plainly bored;
3. think that changing the curriculum will reverse an attendance slide;
4. hope the undated approach will make the Sunday School leader appear to be “innovative”;
5. are avoiding the hard work of helping teachers improve their skills.

Remember, different is not intrinsically the same thing as better, it may be worse.

Dated or Undated Resources?

Dated materials or ones produced on a quarterly basis often offer more comprehensive leader and member helps. A dated or quarterly plan usually offers a balanced and comprehensive study of the Bible over a long period of time. If your church chooses a dated or quarterly plan, it is important to stay with that plan, rather than switch back and forth from quarter to quarter.

Undated resources do offer variety, but they are usually more expensive and may not provide helps for teaching. They do offer the means for adult classes to address immediate, life-issue needs that arise in a particular group of adults. As an illustration, one church used dated literature most of the time. Because of the recent national interest in Islam and the Christian faith, a class decided to take a month to study this topic and then return to dated materials after this excursion. This meant that the teacher had to find reliable curriculum materials based upon the Bible, devise his own teaching strategy, and provide member materials.

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Permanent or Temporary Groups

Related to the discussion above is the idea of temporary or permanent groups. The former have a short-term membership since they will disband after the study. On the other hand, permanent groups have an ongoing membership and continue indefinitely. If temporary groups are allowed to develop and class members go from one group to another, pretty soon the cafeteria menu will run out of interesting topics and some people will “elective out” of Sunday School for a time with the excuse that the church did not offer something that “met their needs.”

5. are avoiding the hard work of helping teachers improve their skills.

Added to this dilemma is the constant search for subject-matter specialists. In adult Sunday School with permanent groups, teachers are expected to teach Jeremiah as well as John. Using temporary groups, the church cannot offer “courses” until specialists in the topics are enlisted or developed. This is what happened to adult Discipleship Training in the 1980’s when churches offered course choices. To quote a well-known ad, “membership has its privileges.”

A Suggested Literature Evaluation Process:

- Where do you start in making curriculum decisions for adults? Your church’s mission statement, listing of church goals, and perhaps the church covenant are good places to start. These should include a statement on discipleship. Talk with church leaders about how they understand in practical terms the concepts of discipleship and evangelism and how these are assigned throughout the church. The sequence is mission before materials, not the reverse. Where is the church denominationally? This affects the choices.

- The Adult Christian Education Task Force or Committee

If your church is considering changing adult Sunday School curriculum, then they should consider electing an adult Christian Education Task Force. This would be a temporary group charged with establishing guidelines and adopting curriculum criteria. The task force could be empowered to act for the entire adult Sunday School division, including classes who have not cooperated with the church in the past in literature selection. They could develop policies and procedures for classes to submit their proposals, if they varied from a dated literature plan.

If there were a continuing need for a group to consider requests, an Adult Christian Education Committee could be developed to replace the task force.

Criteria

Here are some criteria used to choose literature. These criteria apply to both dated and undated materials. Your church may decide to establish additional criteria beyond these:

Biblical/Theological Criteria

The adult Bible study literature should:

- Reflect the conviction that “The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.” (1963 Baptist Faith and Message)

- Be consistent with beliefs important to Baptists as listed by the Baptist Distinctives Committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas: authority of the Bible, autonomy of the local congregation of believers, believer’s baptism and church membership, congregational church government, deity and lordship of Jesus Christ, evangelism and missions (the Great Commission), religious freedom and separation of church and state, salvation only by grace through faith, security of the believer, soul competency and the priesthood of the believer, symbolic understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and voluntary cooperation among churches.

- Be based upon sound principles of biblical interpretation. Include sound biblical commentary that is based upon translations of the Bible that are readable for today’s adults and reflect as accurately as possible the original languages and biblical manuscripts available. Examples: The Holy Bible, New International Version (North American Edition) and the New American Standard Bible.

- Be evangelistic. That is, the literature should encourage unsaved adult Sunday School members to trust Christ as Savior and help motivate adult class members to share their faith.